

Mission Work of Churches of Christ in Croatia 1960s – 2010

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Abstract

Churches of Christ in the Croatian context are a minority religious community and, due to their small numbers, are relatively unknown and under-researched. In this article, the focus is on the missionary work of American Churches of Christ in Croatia between the 1960s and 2010 and the results achieved. The first section introduces foundations for work in Europe, notably through the role of Otis Gatewood and the Eastern European Mission (EEM). Section two discusses the beginnings of the Work in Croatia, focusing on a few key US missionaries and ministries that were used in missionary work. The third section explores the importance of Mladen Jovanović for the establishment of Churches of Christ in Croatia, and section four discusses subsequent American missionaries who made significant contributions to missionary work in Croatia. Section five identifies three Croats who became leaders in the Croatian Churches of Christ through missionary work, and section six



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provides a brief reflection on the results of that initial missionary work. The conclusion is that, even though US missionaries came from a Stone-Campbell Movement background, past and current Croatian workers have found their Stone-Campbell heritage to be part of their historical/theological interests but not of daily relevance. The emphasis is rather on the Lord Jesus and his Word. The findings presented in this article are based primarily on eyewitness testimony collected through interviews and email correspondence.

Keywords: *Restoration movement; Churches of Christ; Otis Gatewood; Eastern European Mission; Mladen Jovanović; Croatia*

Introduction

Churches of Christ in the Croatian context are a minority religious community and, due to their small numbers, are relatively unknown and under-researched. In Croatian context Churches of Christ were researched as part of the project “Religious Situation in Croatia” (Plačko 1991), Juraj Kolarić wrote about them in his book *Ekumenska Trilogija (Ecumenical Thrilogy)* (2005), Ankica Marinović Bobinac and Dinka Marinović Jerolimov wrote about them in the book *Vjerske zajednice u Hrvatskoj (Religious Communities in Croatia)* (2008), they were mentioned in the collection of papers *500 godina protestantizma: baština i otisci u hrvatskom društvu (500 Years of Protestantism: Legacy and Imprints in Croatian Society)* (2018), in 2007, Mladen Jovanović wrote an article “The Restoration Movement of the Churches of Christ” in which he gave an overview of history and key principles of the Restoration movement, and these churches are currently researched as part of the project “Churches of the Reformation Heritage in the Republic of Croatia 1990–2020.”

In this article, the focus is on the missionary work of American Churches of Christ in Croatia between the 1960s and 2010 and its outcomes. Namely, mission work by American Churches of Christ in Europe began in the mid-20th century. As is mostly true with Europe, the continent is regarded as a Christian place and in little need of evangelization. Over and over again, this proves to be an opinion in great need of correction, and missionaries who come to live and work in Europe eventually leave transformed, with Europe placed deeply in their hearts and minds. So was the case with Otis Gatewood, a man who brought a little piece of the Restoration Movement¹ into Germany and began to dream of a work that would overcome the borders of European countries. His dream was likewise pres-

1 For more info about the Restoration movement in the Croatian language, see Jambrek 2007, 295–296.

ent within his family, and in the summer of 1969, his son, David Gatewood, moved to Croatia to start a Church of Christ among young people. He was accompanied by his wife, Sandra, and another couple who had come to Croatia a few months earlier, Bud and Beverly Pickle. One of the first contacts they made upon arriving in Zagreb, Croatia, was their language teacher, Mladen Jovanović. Through personal evangelism, the first missionaries befriended Mladen and his wife, Dragica, which led to their conversion and to their service with the Church of Christ in Zagreb for almost 40 years. Jovanović became a preacher for the church in 1971 and continued in that role until he died in 2013.

Many short and long-term missionaries have visited Croatia since the first two couples arrived. Each brought something unique, and many began ministries. The main evangelistic strategy at the beginning included radio broadcasts and summer camps on the Croatian coast. Many short-term missionaries came from Oklahoma Christian College for the summer. Long-term missionaries came from Sunset School of Preaching, Abilene Christian College, and Oklahoma Christian College. Their work focused on teaching, leading children at camps, directing a Bible School, doing radio and youth ministry, helping with humanitarian aid, and many other acts of benevolence. Another noteworthy ministry is the founding of the Council of Churches of Christ in Croatia, which fostered unity among many churches in the country.

The present study examines the development of the Churches of Christ in Croatia, shaped by missionaries associated with the Restoration Movement between the 1960s and 2010. Particular attention is given to how this theological and ecclesiological heritage informed the initial formation of the mission, provided its operational framework, and underwent processes of contextualization within the Croatian socio-cultural environment.² The study further explores how these dynamics contributed to the emergence of distinct forms of ministry. Methodologically, a substantial portion of the data was collected through interviews and email correspondence with first- and second-hand witnesses, due to the scarcity or absence of written records. While such sources are inherently partial and may reflect subjective perspectives, this study preserves a valuable segment of historical memory and offers a foundation for future research on the work and activities of the Churches of Christ in Croatia in the period after 2010.

2 In this context, “contextualization” refers to the process by which the Christian message and ecclesial practices are expressed within a specific cultural setting without losing their core theological content. For example, such dynamic is reflected in David Bosch’s understanding of contextualization, in which the Gospel retains its normative and universal character, while cultural forms remain secondary and adaptable. As Bosch argues, “culture and context are the servants of the Gospel *adiaphora*, non-essentials, variable” (Bosch 1982, 10).

1. The Foundation for Work in Europe

1.1. *The Legacy of Otis Gatewood*

Missions, in the minds of American Restorationists, have their foundation in the 19th century. Early in the Movement, a strong sense of responsibility and a calling for the United States guided its leaders. James F. MacLear (1978, 192) writes that “Past testimony about the nation’s universal role had included both the foreign missions emphasis on world crusade and a more isolationist but equally evangelical stress on America as a providential refuge and example of true Christianity.”

The earliest missionary efforts in Europe date back to 1875, and in the years leading up to World War II, there were attempts to evangelize Northern, Western, and Eastern Europe, resulting in few converts and few societies or organizations (Foster 2005, 309–310). It was not until after World War II that the mission to Europe became very fruitful among the Churches of Christ, particularly in Germany, later spreading to the former Yugoslavia. Although it is true that “already during the war, various members stationed in the European theater submitted articles for the *Gospel Advocate* and the *Firm Foundation*, urging a massive program of evangelism in that part of the world” (Hughes 2008, 233), it was not until the end of the War, in 1947, that major steps were taken for the work in Europe.

The pleas from Europe were heard. One man in particular, Otis Gatewood, played an important role in the mission to Europe and, subsequently, to Croatia, a former Yugoslav republic. Gatewood was born and raised in Texas and educated at Texas Tech University, Abilene Christian University, Pepperdine University, and the University of Utah at Salt Lake City. He was the first full-time missionary of the Broadway Church of Christ in Lubbock, Texas, when he was sent to New Mexico in 1937. In 1939, he moved to Salt Lake City to begin work that targeted Mormons (Foster 2005, 353). As he was preaching in Utah, at the outbreak of World War II, he realized that the Mormon Church was bringing home all of their missionaries from Europe, about five hundred of them. Churches of Christ had no missionaries in Europe at the time, and the dream began. Gatewood met with Norvel Young, a school friend and preacher at the Broadway Church of Christ in Lubbock, Texas, and started talking and dreaming about going to Europe. Norvel Young began laying the groundwork with the elders at the Broadway Church of Christ (Crouch 2009).

The idea soon became possible when certain steps were taken toward achieving the goal of evangelism in Europe. “After a planning meeting for prospective missionaries to Germany at George Pepperdine College in 1944 and a survey trip by Otis Gatewood and business man Paul Sherrod shortly after the war, the Broadway Church of Christ held a special lectureship in August 1946 to discuss

cooperation for evangelism and benevolence in Europe and Asia” (Foster 2005, 311). From that, a system of “sponsoring churches” developed. Broadway became a “sponsoring church” for the work in Germany (Foster 2005, 311).

In 1947, Otis Gatewood, along with Roy Palmer, came to Switzerland intending to go to Germany. In Switzerland, they had to wait for a permit, which they received from Lucius D. Clay, the Deputy Military Governor of Germany (Foster 2005, 311). Gatewood confirmed, “Roy Palmer and I were the first two of any religious groups to enter Germany following World War II” (McBride and Shipp 1999, 18). Both of these men had wives and children back home. Their report of the conditions was that everything was bombed, people were starving, and there were no jobs. Still, they nevertheless made arrangements, went back to the States, and returned to Frankfurt with their families, where they volunteered and worked in humanitarian aid. This is how they made their first contacts for Bible study (Crouch 2009).

The Gatewood family, Otis and Alma Gatewood, with their son David and daughter Darlene, returned to the United States in 1957. In the ten years they were in Germany, the Gatewoods worked with orphans, adopted a 9-month-old German girl (Darlene), and helped many Americans adopt the war’s orphaned children. Upon his return, Otis Gatewood became the first president of Michigan Christian College and, in that role, influenced many to reach the people of Europe. The assessment in the *Christian Chronicle* is correct when they concluded:

No quality contributed more to Otis Gatewood’s ability to bring growth in the church than his power with people. He is a keen observer of those he meets. He recognizes people with talent and potential. He has a Barnabas-like spirit for cultivating capable people. He has given a lot of personal support to his friends and co-workers through the years. He has been instrumental in encouraging many young people to preach and commit their lives to Christ (McBride 1984, 24).

He likewise encouraged and helped key people start a crucial ministry to Europe, the Eastern European Mission.

1.2. The Eastern European Mission (EEM) begins in Vienna, Austria

Otis Gatewood returned to Europe, this time to Vienna, Austria, in 1966. His wife had passed away, and his heart and mind could not stay away from Europe. Austria was a neutral country and thus a wonderful climate for all the missionaries who wanted to work with Communist countries. Located in central Europe, Austria was also geographically and strategically useful. Many missionaries stationed themselves in Vienna. Joy Crouch (2009), Gatewood’s personal secretary in Vienna, reports:

Otis was a great recruiter and fundraiser. He was responsible for getting people in all over Germany and Austria. Many of these people who now formed a group in Vienna were students in Abilene, and he encouraged them to come. Bob Hare was at Harding, and he came to Munich, started a church there, then moved to Vienna and began working there. In 1956, when they had the Hungarian uprising, Otis made a trip to visit Bob Hare at that time, who was already in Vienna. They went down to the Balaton See, and they watched people fleeing, and that was one of the things that really sparked them to think that they needed to get a group together to go into these countries to start preaching the Gospel.

Hare's and Gatewood's passion for Communist countries led them to dream and find new ways to reach them. Bob Hare began working with the church in Vienna in 1955. Bruce Stockdale was working there with military Christians, and Rob Pitts joined the work in 1959. Six more couples, all from Abilene Christian College, joined in: Bob Stewart, Lynn Camp, Gwen Earnhart, Frank McCuthan, and Otis Gatewood, who influenced the choice in location and the work. In 1962, Tom Turner followed (Rybinski 2009). The main mission of the EEM was, and remains, to provide Bibles in native languages to Eastern Europe. According to *The Stone-Campbell Movement: A Global History*,

...EEM printed and distributed Bibles, devotional works, and other Christian literature to people living in the nations of Eastern Europe, then under Soviet control. Initially operating out of Dallas, Texas, EEM relocated to Vienna in 1974. After the fall of communism in Eastern Europe in the early 1990s, EEM began conducting evangelistic trips, supporting congregations, conducting Christian service camps, and doing other more direct forms of mission work. EEM relied on a very large network of Churches of Christ across the globe, translators and agents in Eastern Europe, and its Vienna staff to support and carry on the work. It [*sic*] its first fifty years of work, EEM was credited with translating the Bible into twenty dialects and distributing approximately eight million copies throughout Eastern Europe (2013, 358).

The idea sprang from regular visits from Vienna to different Communist countries. On such visits, they realized they were unable to buy Bibles. However, they believed the printed Word was very important, powerful, and alive, so they came up with an idea: to set up a print shop and get people from these various countries to help in the project. Since Vienna was a neutral place, there were thousands of refugees from many nations. It was not unusual to meet people of different nationalities. The first building where they had offices was owned by the Austrian Government, but they were using it for refugees. The Government allowed missionaries to use the facility if they would take care of the refugees in return. Soon, the staff was not made up only of American missionaries but also of people from Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and other Communist countries. The dream saw its first fruit.

The first printer for the EEM was purchased by the McGee Foundation (to print Bibles), but for several years, there was no money to buy paper. Finally, a man who had been a professional printer returned from South Africa to Austria and began helping, which led to the printing of one of the first Bibles – the Hungarian Bible. Officially, Bible printing started in 1977, but before that, only small pamphlets were printed. The mission director at the time was Gwen Hensley, who was the driving force behind the organization. Gatewood and others were involved in many different aspects. The EEM was involved in printing the Croatian Bible by providing paper to the Catholic society that printed it in Croatia (Crouch 2009).

Mladen Jovanović, one of the first converts and the current preacher for the Church of Christ in Zagreb, Croatia, reported on this in greater detail:

The Eastern European Mission was the most active organized mission work that we were connected with from the beginning. Thanks to them, we received some of the earliest works of literature, and they helped us secure 20,000 Bibles printed in Vienna and exported to Croatia in 1984. The second edition, another 20,000 Bibles, was printed in Sarajevo in 1986, and was distributed free of charge also to some Catholic schools and parishes at that time. In 1980, when Dragica and I returned from the States, we couldn't get social and medical insurance from the government of Croatia, so the EEM mission offered us the possibility to be employed by them, helping us solve our social status (Jovanović 2009b).

Clearly, the Eastern European Mission had a major impact on the work in the Churches of Christ in Croatia.

2. The Beginnings of the Work in Croatia

2.1. First Missionaries

In the fall of 1967, Otis Gatewood and Bob Hare came to Zagreb as part of one of their research trips to Communist countries. They were unable to find a hotel room because of the international fair happening at the city fairgrounds. They went to the tourist office, and the lady told them that they were renting rooms in the student dorm by the Sava River. They took a room and realized that there were 40,000 students in the University of Zagreb who did not know Christ as their Lord and Savior. They got down on their knees on the floor and started praying, "Lord, if we are going to reach this country, we need to do it through the student population" (Crouch 2009). They also found that Americans could come to Zagreb, enroll in language classes, and obtain student visas.

The added benefit was that Yugoslavia had never signed the Warsaw Pact, so people from there, unlike those from other Communist countries, could travel

freely to the West. In return, foreign students were allowed to travel and study in Yugoslavia. The University of Portland agreed with the University of Yugoslavia, allowing students from Portland to enroll, and the first step in their enrollment was to learn Croatian. David Gatewood, son of Otis and Alma Gatewood, and Bud Pickle were schoolmates at Abilene Christian University (ACU) and were part of a group preparing to go to Russia. The group soon fell apart when they were unable to receive entry visas. David and Bud, 1967 graduates of ACU (ACC at the time), were asked to consider going to Yugoslavia rather than Russia. In 1969, together with their families, they moved to Zagreb, Croatia. The first to come were Bud and Beverly Pickle, and soon after, within a year, David and Sandra Gatewood followed (Crouch 2009).

Bud and Beverly Pickle met at Abilene Christian University and married while finishing their education. Beverly (after 13 years of marriage, Bud and Beverly divorced, and Beverly remarried Charles Morrison) recalls their call to Croatia:

Beginning in 1967, we made several trips to Europe before finally deciding to go to Zagreb. In the beginning, we were very interested in entering Russia. We spent time in Helsinki, Finland, but God began to make it quite clear that was not the place to be. We were led to visit Zagreb, and once there, our main thrust began to turn from Russia (because of its very strong Communist state) and more to Zagreb (Morrison 2009).

In January 1969, they moved to Croatia with the vision to spread God's word among the people of the nation. They came as students, eager to learn the language and culture to reach more people. Their understanding of the needs of Eastern European people deepened, and they were able to reach Croatia in ways suited to the time and place. Bud Pickle explains:

The most striking and obvious differences in Christian outreach between East and West Europe was the minimalization of denominationalism. Evangelism in the United States and Western Europe was often focused on the individual denomination and its unique history or minor differences ... in Eastern Europe, the "quiet" evangelistic emphasis was mostly on the focal point of Christ Jesus, the Saviour... Eastern Europeans had to endure suffering or heartache to maintain an active faith. There was little advertising and less glamour, but the meeting halls were packed with the faithful and with many more searching for purpose. In most cases, many of the faithful had to meet in secrecy or face penalties such as loss of work or even jail time if a believer took his faith very seriously. Open evangelism was not only discouraged but also banned and subject to severe penalties. There was little opportunity to express preference regarding the comfort of the meeting place or the denominational choice. Most often, "unity in Christ" existed because there was no opportunity to fight or disagree among your brethren (Pickle 2009).

David and Sandra Gatewood likewise met and married while attending Abilene Christian University. Their first call was to Russia, but they convinced Bud and Beverly to join them on their team to Yugoslavia. Otis Gatewood's initiative to go to Croatia, along with tensions within the group over Russia, soon enabled them to head there that same year. David and Sandra did not have children when they came, so they had plenty of time to spend with university students. They wanted to share their faith, and that is what they told the people they met. They were also able to adopt a child while living in Croatia (Crouch 2009).

The vision and mission of these two couples were simple, yet profound. They wanted to reach people for Christ; they wanted God's Word to be heard among the nation; and they believed that this could be achieved through personal contacts, which inevitably led to the formation of other ministries. Beverly Morrison (2009) (formerly Pickle) concludes that "We knew that in order to do this, we would need to learn the culture, language, and the people before we could be effective at all." Their awareness of cultural differences and sensitivity to the country's needs enabled them to be effective evangelists, first through personal contacts and later through the formation of a radio ministry and church camps.

2.2. Personal Contacts

The first missionaries came to the University of Zagreb as students. Many of their concerns about adjusting to the culture were overcome by their ability and willingness to learn and to meet new people. One of their first contacts was their Croatian-language teacher, Mladen Jovanović, who later converted and went on to lead the Churches of Christ in Croatia, serving as the overseeing minister for all mission posts and as the director of the Council of Churches of Christ in Croatia. Other contacts were mostly students at the University and their neighbors. Soon enough, people began coming to the missionaries' homes, where they would share many meals together and become great friends. Some of these efforts resulted in lifelong relationships and brought people to the Lord.

2.3. Radio Ministry

As mentioned in the introduction, the primary means of evangelization at the beginning was radio broadcasting. Bud Pickle, with the help of Mladen Jovanović, ran this ministry from 1970 to 1974.

Bud was approached by the elders of the Highland Church in Abilene, Texas, regarding his interest in starting a radio outreach in Yugoslavia. Landon Saunders, the minister at Highland, visited Bud and Beverly in Zagreb, and the Croatian radio ministry concept was born. Landon and Bud each wrote and shared radio

message scripts, which were reviewed by several university linguists. Many of the early scripts were about the evidence of a higher power, about the possibility that there was a God who created the earth, the heavens, and man, and interacted personally with his creation (Pickle 2009).

Bud desired for Mladen to read the Croatian text over the airwaves, but it was not until 1971, when Mladen converted, that they became full-time co-workers. Between 1974 and 1980, the programs were halted, but Mladen resumed them in 1980, using a studio in Lausanne, Switzerland. Then, in 1985, after building a studio in Graz, Austria, the ministry continued from there. In 1991, the radio transmission moved from Portugal to Croatia, and in time, there were 12 stations broadcasting the Christian message in Croatia.³ Beverly Morrison (2009) recalls this as an incredible evangelistic tool:

The radio ministry seemed like the best way of spreading the Word and thereby reaching more people. The reception was tremendous in the beginning—many letters and requests for Bibles came. We began translating biblical books, Bibles, and literature, and oversaw the printing of such ... We were able to meet many people outside of Zagreb. This was a tremendous outreach tool.

2.4. Camps

From the beginning of the work, the main activities were Bible camps and retreats organized by Austrian churches, which Croats could attend with groups of Christian or non-Christian friends. Getting people to cross the border was not hard; it was interesting for people in Communist Yugoslavia (Jovanović 2009b). However, David and Bud began dreaming of a camp setting in Croatia, and soon they settled on the city of Pula. The first camp was in 1970 and was mostly focused on university students. Every year, groups of short-term missionaries came to help at the camps, either teaching, helping with organization, or leading kids and youth. Some of the missionaries came from other countries of the former Yugoslavia, such as Gary and Danita Jackson and Mark and Linda Scorick, American missionaries who were church-planting in Belgrade, Serbia. Others came from the United States as part of short-term outreach teams and remained for many years afterward, including Roger Massey (Jovanović 2009b).

The camps had two main purposes. The first was the encouragement, growth, and fellowship of the existing Christian body, and the second was outreach. Just as they had done in years past, traveling with a Croatian Christian friend to Austria, Gary and Danita Jackson traveled to Croatia with Serbian Christians and their

3 Jambrek mentions the following: “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” (Jambrek 2013, 224).

friends. In their report, a sense of belonging can be felt, with a touch of sadness over the war that parted these two nationalities to the core. Gary Jackson (2009) wrote that “we had a very close relationship with the Croatian churches. When the war broke out, those relations were somewhat strained, but we are thankful they seem to be better now.” Gary and his wife were also missionaries in China, where they did the same thing they had done in Serbia from 1983 to 1993. They both attended the Sunset School of Preaching. Their co-workers in Serbia for many years were Mark and Linda Scorick, who eventually returned to the United States (Jovanović 2009b).

Roger Massey, however, returned to Croatia in 2004 and has worked to plant a church in an urban part of Zagreb, which has around 65,000 residents and no evangelical church. He came to Zagreb as a summer mission campaigner, working mostly in camps for four years in a row from 1980 to 1984, and then moved to Zagreb, where he lived from 1984 to 1990. He received his B.A. from Oklahoma Christian University and his M.A. from Abilene Christian University (Massey 2009). His ten years with the Church of Christ in Zagreb have been very productive, as described below in the section on subsequent missionaries.

3. Mladen Jovanović (1945 - 2013) – Life and Ministry

Mladen Jovanović was born in Zagreb in 1945, at the end of WWII, when education in the schools of former Yugoslavia was predominantly atheistic. Believing in God was considered nonsense, though his parents were traditional Roman Catholic believers. Religion was not a part of daily life, but they tried to observe two Catholic holidays, Christmas and Easter. Until almost the end of his college education, Mladen was not really interested in religion; it was something that belonged to his parents’ or even grandparents’ generation.

Mladen married Dragica in 1969, and that same year graduated with a degree in Philology from the College of Philosophy at the University of Zagreb. He was one of the better students and was immediately offered a teaching position at the school. In October of that year, he began teaching, and his first class was for foreign students learning Croatian. The foreign students were mostly from Africa and the Middle East because studies were free of charge and the University of Zagreb had a special agreement with universities in those regions. The first group had Palestinians, Sudanese, and two American couples. That was Mladen’s first encounter with Americans.

The Gatewoods and Pickles befriended Mladen right away. Mladen was struck by the fact that these people were his peers, yet active believers, Christians. Jovanović (2009b) recalls, “It was amazing and shocking to me at the same time because I couldn’t believe that someone who was so young and educated could believe in myths and legends.” Bud Pickle, who became Mladen’s closest friend,

gave him a Bible, baptized him, and became his co-worker. He was 26 at the time. Bud and Beverly had a child, and Mladen and Dragica were also blessed with their first child in 1969 as well. The two couples had many things in common, yet Mladen and Dragica did not yet share in their love for the Lord.

In 1971, the Ministry of Education sent Mladen to teach at the University of Warsaw, Poland. Dragica stayed behind in Croatia to be able to keep an elementary school teacher's position, and their one-and-a-half-year-old boy, moved together with his father to Poland. In the winter of that same year, Jovanović (2009b) recalls his conversion:

Alone with my boy, one evening, the Spirit spoke to me in a new way. I asked myself what would happen to me if I were to die that very day. Reality of death brought me to the source of life, more than anything else, more than any arguments that I was given by missionaries, anything I was thinking before. Then Christmas was coming close, and Poland was communist, but they were observing it as a national holiday. On December 15th, they would close the semester and open it up on January 15th. I came to Croatia for a month and wanted to meet with Bud Pickle. I approached him and told him I had made a decision. I caught him off guard, but I asked him to baptize me. I was studying the Material that Bud gave me in his discussions. I was convinced there was a God, and I was looking for a way to connect with him, so I even had a prayer life. I knew that I had to do more than something deep in my heart to say that Jesus is my savior. I need to do something tangible, something public. Dragica was shocked, and my mother openly said that I betrayed all family values. One Sunday at the house group, Dragica asked if she could take from the bread and cup, and I said that it is perfectly ok, but that it probably doesn't mean the same for her as it does for me. Then she burst into tears... she realized that if something happened to her, we would be separated forever. In early summer, with another baby on the way, she was baptized.

The family then moved together to Poland, worshiped there at the Church of Christ in Warsaw, Poland, and in 1979, after 4 terms of teaching (usually professors were allowed to stay a maximum of two terms), they were asked to relocate to another country. Upon careful consideration, Mladen quit his job, told his boss in Zagreb that he was interested in studying the Bible, and then moved to Austin, Texas, to do graduate work in Bible. In May of 1980, the family returned to Zagreb, Croatia, with their last child on the way (Jovanović 2009b).

When Mladen returned with his family, it had been six years since the first missionaries left. From 1971 to 1980, the church was functioning as a house group, gathering sporadically when the Jovanović family visited from Poland on vacation, a month in the winter and four months in the summer. During this time, several missionaries came to Zagreb and tried to help however they could. One of those was Paul Lakey with his wife, Rae.

Rae and Paul Lakey heard about Croatia from Bob Hare and David Gatewood. Motivated to meet the incredible people of Croatia, they gave two years of their lives and served in Zagreb from 1976 to 1978. During this time, they learned Croatian, helped with camps and weekly services, made home visits during the week, and supported ministries that were already underway. In their own words, they were unprepared to work alone, and it was not until 1980, when Mladen returned, that the church began to form on the outside.

Jovanović served the church as its preacher from the time of his conversion. It was not until 1985 that the first apartment was rented, and eventually bought, in downtown Zagreb (Amruševa street), and the church began meeting there instead of in people's homes. In time, the church on Amruševa Street outgrew its meeting space, so Jovanović sought approval to purchase and renovate a larger house in a well-connected residential area near the center of Zagreb. God provided the necessary funds through various sources for both the purchase and the required improvements, and in May 2000, the church moved into its new building on Kušlanova Street (Croatia for Christ s. a.).

During the Croatian War of Independence, Stanko Jambrek writes:

...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 afterward. 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 (Jambrek 2013, 224).

In an interview for the *Chronicle* in 2003, Jovanović discussed the roles of Churches of Christ in post-Soviet Europe, and particularly during the war:

Churches of Christ, two at the beginning of the war, decided to put the light of the Lord on the top of the hill. Two humanitarian organizations were formed. The decision was made that all workers, foreign or national, would stay in the country at all cost. The "Peace on Earth" Church of Christ humanitarian organization became a recognized and well-esteemed relief group. Croatian Christians ministered to more than 3,000 refugee families. With the assistance of American Church of Christ humanitarian organizations and churches from many countries of Europe, more than \$3.5 million worth of food, clothing, sanitary, and medical supplies were distributed to those in need (Tryggestad 2013).

Furthermore, in 2003, when the government of the Republic of Croatia signed an agreement with 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. On this occasion, twelve members of the Churches of Christ established a Council of the Churches of Christ, and Jovanović was elected its first president. He also played a role in founding the Protestant Evangelical Alliance in Croatia, where he served as its secretary, and collaborated with editorial teams on several important publications and journals, including *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) (*Lexicon of Evangelical Christianity*), *Vjerske zajednice u Hrvatskoj* (2008) (*Religious Communities in Croatia*) and *Kairos: Evanđeoski teoloski časopis* (2007–2013) (*Kairos: Evangelical Journal of Theology*) (Jambrek 2013, 224–225). As a writer, he published several books⁴ and worked as a translator or editor of several publications.⁵

In retrospect, from this brief overview of Mladen's life, we can say that when the Jovanović family moved back to Croatia, real growth began. However, with the help of subsequent missionaries, many other ministries began to take shape.

4. Subsequent American Missionaries

4.1. Roger Massey

As previously mentioned, Roger Massey came to Croatia as a summer mission campaigner for four consecutive years before moving to Zagreb in 1984. Roger had learned of Yugoslavia through Oklahoma Christian University and was intrigued by the people and missionaries that had already worked there, so he visited each summer and helped with the camps organized by Mladen Jovanović

- 4 Jovanović, Mladen. 1994. *Put do Boga*. Zagreb: Kristova crkva; Jovanović, Mladen. 1996. *Slava Bogu na visini*. Zagreb: Kristova crkva; Jovanović, Mladen. 2006. *Čisto srce stvori mi, Bože!* Zagreb: Kristova crkva; Jovanović, Mladen. 2009. *Prigni uho svoje*. Zagreb: Biblijski institut; Jovanović, Mladen. 2012. *I riječ crkvom postade: Kristova crkva u svjetlu i ogledalu Božje riječi*. Zagreb: Biblijski institut.
- 5 Jovanović, Mladen. 2005. *Pošalji mene!: spomen zbornik dr. James A. Williams*. Novi sad: Teološki fakultet; Zagreb: Teološki fakultet „Matija Vlačić Ilirik;“ Protestantsko-evanđeosko vijeće. 1997. *Evanđeoski pokret: zbornik radova sa Znanstvenog skupa Protestantsko-evanđeoskog vijeća povodom 150. obljetnice Evanđeoske alijanse, održanog 28. - 30. listopada 1996. u Zagrebu*. Zagreb: Protestantsko-evanđeosko vijeće; Lewis, Clive Staples. 2009 & 2016. *Kršćanstvo nije iluzija: vodič kroz osnove vjere*. Translation: Mladen Jovanović. Split: Verbum; Jovanović, Mladen, ed. 2006. *Novi zavjet: suvremeni hrvatski prijevod*. Zagreb: Svjetski biblijski prevodilački centar; Jovanović, Mladen, ed. 2012. *Capetownski iskaz o predanju: ispovijest vjere i poziv na djelovanje*. Zagreb: Protestantsko evanđeosko vijeće (PEV) u Republici Hrvatskoj; Biblijski institut.

and Ivan Tešić. This led to his five-year commitment to serve the church. In the end, he stayed for six and a half years. He enrolled at the University of Zagreb to do Yugoslav studies, and this was his way into the country.

During Roger's work for the Church of Christ in Zagreb, the youth ministry began. Although Roger did many other things as well, as he recalls, "I worked for the church. I planned and organized camps, planned nearly all church activities, led worship, preached, visited people in their homes, organized and taught youth classes, traveled to other towns, and had Bible studies there. Basically, I did everything that needed to be done" (Massey 2009). His main focus was youth ministry. Through joint meetings with Serbian youth and satellite work with the group in Mursko Središće (about two hours from Zagreb), the youth of Zagreb grew into the young adults who formed the church. Some have strayed from the Lord, but many are either missionaries or active members of different churches around Croatia. The Bible study group in Mursko Središće resulted in a growing church named "Church of Jesus Christ." The church had a unique story because it came into existence as a result of the influence of two denominations: the Churches of Christ and the Baptist Church. For some time, it was part of two unions (the Churches of Christ and the Baptists), but eventually it officially joined the Baptist union in Croatia.

Vlado and Marina Hobljaj, who were one of the first people in that group and part of the leadership of the church in Mursko Središće, recall: "The Church of Christ in Zagreb was a great model, support, and inspiration to us. But even more than that, some particular people, like Roger Massey, Kathy Harvey, and Mladen Jovanović, became our spiritual mentors and leaders" (Hoblaj 2009). They go on to describe the beginning of their work in connection with the Church of Christ in Zagreb:

The Church in Središće began in the early 1990s. It was the time of the severe war in Croatia, and we were blessed to receive humanitarian help from faithful brothers and sisters in the United States through the Church of Christ in Zagreb. Because of helping people in need, we've been able to use the public library not only to distribute material blessings but also to share the gospel itself. So, we began meeting more regularly for prayer meetings and Bible studies. In addition, we've occasionally been visiting the Church of Christ in Zagreb and the Baptist church in Mačkovec. In November 1997, we felt like it was time to move into the hired place, and we considered that event the official beginning of the church in Središće (Hoblaj 2009).

Roger Massey, together with his wife and three children, returned to Croatia in 2004 with a renewed vision and goal. His work in the past for the Church of Christ bore much fruit, and in 2009, he described his work in the following way:

I am part of a team effort to plant life-giving, cell-based churches among the Croatian people by connecting people to Jesus and to one another. I teach college-level English composition at Zagreb's Biblical Institute, and I serve as a writer, designer, and distributor for the World Bible Translation Center. I led the mission team, but later turned that role over to a Croatian who also became the pastor of the church. Our vision is to utilize cell-based home communities to evangelize, build community, and raise up leaders (Massey 2009).

4.2. Joy Crouch

Joy Crouch was encouraged by David and Sandra Gatewood to move to Vienna, Austria, in 1975, and once there, she began working at the office of Otis Gatewood. He introduced her to Mladen and Dragica Jovanović, and for the following six years (until she returned to the States in 1979), Joy helped at camps each summer. The following ten years, she visited Europe almost every year, but it was not until 1990 that she decided to move to Zagreb and help with the local church there. Her vision was already underway in 1989, when she held many one-on-one Bible studies with people while living in Zagreb from May to October. Upon her return in 1990, this vision was sidetracked by the war that was starting in Yugoslavia. Her goals needed to be re-evaluated, and the main way of evangelization became humanitarian aid (Crouch 2009).

Even though Zagreb was in great need of humanitarian aid, peripheral towns such as Varaždin and Daruvar experienced even greater distress. Joy sought to help the people in these regions by bringing them food and clothing and teaching them English. Both of these places soon became stations from which new church plants began; however, when another missionary left Daruvar, the work there stopped.

Joy left for the States in 1997 to begin a two-year fundraising project to buy new facilities for the church in Zagreb. Until then, she helped with the organization of yearly camps, invited several speakers to hold seminars - one of them being Rubel Shelly, who came to teach ethics to the students at the medical university in Zagreb - organized building projects, and assisted in any possible way. In addition to all of that, Crouch returned to Croatia every year to encourage local leaders and workers to persist in their efforts for the kingdom of God (Crouch 2009).

4.3. Mark and Christine Parker

Mark Parker, an English teacher from Oregon, came to Croatia in 1991 to prepare for work in Čakovec. When he married Christine in 1992, they stayed in Zagreb to learn the language. Their ministry was mostly to teach English through the

Bible. However, the war also shaped their goals, and they ended up doing humanitarian aid. They also wanted to plant a church in Daruvar, but confess today that they were unprepared to tackle that work (Parker 2009).

Perhaps the most crucial part of their work and the greatest contribution to the overall work in Croatia was taking over the Bible school. Mladen Jovanović started the school but gave it over to Mark in 1991. When Thomas and Sandra Sibley moved to Croatia in 1999, they took charge of the school and developed what today is the Biblical Institute, an educational center for many students and ministers.

5. Croatian Missionaries – New Church Plants

5.1. Ivan Tešić

Ivan Tešić was born and raised in Bosnia, but came to Croatia in the 1970's to pursue his studies. In his early years, he considered becoming a Roman Catholic priest until he heard the gospel in a completely new way from American missionaries. He recalls that that was the first time he was faced with biblical Christianity (Tešić 2009). His newfound faith led him to further studies at Lubbock Christian University, where he received his B.A., and later to Abilene Christian University, where he received his M.A.

From 1980 to 1990, Ivan lived and worked in Zagreb, but at the beginning of the great turmoil in Yugoslavia, he and his wife, Ruth, together with their children and Ivan's younger brother, Nikola, started working in Zaprešić, a suburb of the capital city, Zagreb. The beginnings were challenging but fruitful, Tešić describes, "...we began working in Zaprešić in a very similar manner as we did in Zagreb at first – meeting with a few people in their homes ... Since the war in Croatia lasted from 1991 to 1995, we were involved in distributing a great deal of humanitarian aid to refugees and people in need. This turned out to be our main and most successful way of evangelizing" (Tešić 2009). Church also developed other ways of doing ministry, such as a Christian Radio program, Croatian and English Bible studies, and children and youth work. At that time, the articulated vision for the future was to "find new ways to build up the current congregation while reaching out to new people" (Tešić 2009).

5.2. Mladen Dominić

Mladen Dominić was born and raised in Čakovec, Croatia, and attended school in Maribor, Slovenia. In 1991, he received an invitation from the church in Zagreb to come and help with their work with the refugees. Mladen, as was customary dur-

ing the war, was very busy with the many refugees who were fleeing to the church daily, and he also attended Bible School and helped with the Radio Ministry. In 1994, the need for humanitarian aid and Bible studies in Varaždin grew to the point that Mladen, together with his wife Renata, spent two years driving there weekly, and then, in 1996, decided to move from Zagreb and begin a full-time ministry in Varaždin.

The church was active in many aspects for the benefit of the entire community where it serves. Some of the main ministries included teaching English through the Bible, monthly children's camps, outreach events for the youth, and new contacts from English classes, and prayer meetings at different places in town, as well as summer camps together with the church in Zagreb. From a retrospective perspective, the stated vision for the future included an even greater connection among the community, its organizations, and the local Christian body (Dominić 2009).

5.3. *Vladimir Pšenko (1963 – 2022)*

Vladimir came from Slavonia, the eastern province of Croatia, and, in 2010, planned to move to Vukovar, a city in the province with a great need for God's Word and Light. One of Vladimir's aunts was renting a basement apartment in the same building where the Church of Christ, Zagreb, started meeting in 1985, the same year that Vladimir moved to Zagreb. He was baptized in 1990, and from 1991 to 2003, he ran the monthly outreach activities known as The Poetry and Song Sessions.⁶ Between 15 and 150 people attended these events. Since 2001, Vladimir and his wife, Renata, have been very active in a ministry serving homeless people in downtown Zagreb and in a radio ministry (Pšenko 2009).

At that time, Vladimir and Renata had finalized the sale of their apartment in Zagreb and acquired a house in Vukovar, intending to relocate at the beginning of 2010 to initiate a full-time ministry there. The Church of Christ in Zagreb functioned as their primary base of support and as an overseeing congregation within Croatia.

6 Pšenko was also a gifted writer. During his life, he published several publications: Pšenko, Vlado et al. 1993. *Evo dolazim: lirska razmišljanja mladih*. Đakovo: Biskupski pastoralni centar Đakovačke i Srijemske biskupije; Pšenko, Vlado 1996. *Ljubav i vjernost: zbirka kršćanske poezije*. Zagreb: Kristova crkva; Pšenko, Vlado et al. 2014. *Upaljene luči*. Osijek: Grafika; Pšenko, Vlado. 2016. *Božji šapat u Dolini blagoslova: motivacijske poruke*. Zagreb: Kristova crkva – Kušlanova; Pšenko, Vlado. 2017. *Božji šapat u Dolini blagoslova: motivacijske poruke*. Zagreb: Kristova crkva – Kušlanova; Pšenko, Vlado. 2018. *Božji šapat u Dolini blagoslova: motivacijske poruke*. Zagreb: Kristova crkva – Kušlanova; Pšenko, Vlado. 2019. *Božji šapat u Dolini blagoslova: motivacijske poruke*. Zagreb: Kristova crkva – Kušlanova.

6. Reflection on the Work of Churches of Christ in Croatia

The work of Churches of Christ in Croatia has been fruitful and productive, and many ministries that have started with the first missionaries or subsequent workers still exist today. However, three distinct and very successful ministries need to be mentioned here because they played a crucial role in two ways. First, they strengthened unity among churches, and second, they served as a springboard for future generations and for the church's plans in Croatia. These three are the Council of Churches of Christ in Croatia, the Biblical Institute, and summer camps.

The Council of Churches of Christ, Croatia came into existence in 2002 as a result of an agreement between the Baptist Union and the government of Croatia concerning matters of common interest, which led to the signing of an agreement between the Baptist Union and the Churches of Christ in 2003.⁷ To “improve cooperation based on evangelical principles between the Government of Croatia and Churches of Christ in Croatia” (Jovanović 2009a), the Council issued an act outlining regulations to follow. In 2010, the Council consisted of 13 different churches of different backgrounds. Most are Churches of Christ, but others include the Church of Jesus Christ, the Wesleyan Church, and the Christ's Church of Brethren.⁸ Through monthly Council meetings and other events, this society proved to be a uniting force among Croatian churches.

The Biblical Institute, founded by Mladen Jovanović, was later led by Mark Parker for a time, but in 1999, Thomas and Sandra Sibley took over the leadership of the Institute. It has served as a place of transformation and unity. With professors and students from different denominations, it was one of the most influential theological training places in the region. Until 2010, 19 students and graduates from the school were involved in various ministries across Europe. At that time, Thomas Sibley (2009) reflected on the future hopes for the church and the school when he wrote, “We would like to see Central and Eastern Europe turning back to God, or at least a gathering in of those who have hearts for God. A passionate moving of God's Spirit over this land to heal, reconcile, and advance the kingdom in the hearts and minds of people here.”

Summer camps have likewise remained a central, ongoing aspect of ministry. For decades, the camp has been the place where Christians bring their unbelieving friends, where people meet the Lord and are baptized, where children are given special attention through certain activities, where the youth can know and experience community, where older generations can rest in fellowship with the

7 For more info about the Council, see Jovanović 2007, 416.

8 On the Christ's Church of Brethren see the following article: Iva Đaković. 2025. “The Development and Activities of Christ's Church of Brethren in Zagreb.” *Kairos* 19, no. 2: 219–261.

Lord and other believers, and where God is active in moving his nation. It began as a powerful tool, and it remained just that after all these years.

Conclusion: The Restoration Movement and Churches of Christ in Croatia

Although all the missionaries who worked in Croatia within the Churches of Christ were either born and educated in the Stone-Campbell tradition or educated solely in it, this fact seems largely irrelevant. European Christians pride themselves on having roots in the early church established at Pentecost, as well as in figures such as Martin Luther and other European heroes of faith. This, of course, is very logical. However, American missionaries who have lived in Croatia for some time have likewise adopted this mindset. Bud Pickle's assessment of church planting in Croatia depicts precisely such notions:

We understood that the Church to be "planted" was NOT a replica of a typical American church. We had only ONE purpose: to plant...the New Testament Church. Naturally, that concept was not fully understood by many of our American church leaders or veteran missionaries. The term "New Testament church" was commonly used within the Church of Christ, and naturally, when our mission was publicized, many in the Church thought we would immediately replicate the Church as visualized in the West... with church buildings, Bible schools, public signs, and newspaper advertising. The truth was that the church was the body of Christ, BELIEVERS.... not an organization, and if we were going to be true to the real New Testament idea of evangelism, then we needed to focus on Christ and his gospel story, not buildings and outward signs of faith (Pickle 2009).

All the missionaries that we have interviewed confirmed that they did, indeed, teach their converts the basic principles of the Stone-Campbell tradition, like "Christians only," "where the Bible speaks, we speak, where the Bible is silent we are silent," and the like, but none of them felt the need to emphasize these principles as part of the Stone-Campbell Movement. Likewise, all the past and current Croatian workers have found their Stone-Campbell heritage to be part of their historical/theological interest, but not of daily relevance. The emphasis is rather on the Lord Jesus and his Word.

Missionaries who came to Europe and demonstrated sensitivity to the local cultural context did not merely transplant ecclesial models, but engaged in processes of adaptation to the needs of the host society. In doing so, they developed a broader understanding of mission in Croatia and contributed to the gradual "de-Americanization" of church life, allowing the Churches of Christ in Croatia to

assume a more locally grounded identity. Rather than a one-directional transfer of beliefs, the mission in Croatia can and should therefore be understood as a transnational process in which both missionaries and local believers mutually shaped the emerging identity of the Churches of Christ. Consequently, a successful mission in the Croatian context was not primarily the result of institutional transplantation, but of relational and context-sensitive engagement. This observation aligns with broader missiological insights that emphasize the importance of local agency and cultural adaptation in the formation of sustainable Christian communities. Although the influence of American missionaries and churches remained significant, and the churches were not fully independent of external support, the aspiration toward an authentically Croatian expression of church life persisted among local believers.

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Nina Lovše i Thomas Sibley

Misijsko djelovanje Kristovih crkava u Hrvatskoj između 1960-ih i 2010.

Sažetak

Kristove crkve u hrvatskom su kontekstu manjinska vjerska zajednica. Budući da se radi o malenom broju vjernika, relativno su nepoznati i nedovoljno istraženi. Ovaj članak bavi se misijskim djelovanjem američkih Kristovih crkava u Hrvat-

skoj između 1960-ih i 2010. te njihovim postignućima. Prvi dio uvodi temelje za rad u Europi, posebno putem uloge Otisa Gatewooda i Istočnoeuropske misije (Eastern European Mission - EEM). Drugi dio bavi se počecima djelovanja u Hrvatskoj, s posebnim osvrtom na nekoliko ključnih misionara iz SAD-a i službe koje su korištene u misijskom radu. Treći dio istražuje važnu ulogu Mladena Jovanovića u osnivanju Kristovih crkava u Hrvatskoj dok četvrti dio govori o kasnijim američkim misionarima koji su ostavili duboki trag na misijskom djelovanju u Hrvatskoj. Peti dio navodi tri Hrvata koji su postali vođe u Kristovim crkvama u Hrvatskoj svojim misijskim radom dok šesti dio pruža kratak osvrt na rezultate toga početnog misijskog djelovanja. Zaključak navodi da iako su američki misionari došli iz pozadine pokreta Stonea i Campbella, prošli i sadašnji hrvatski radnici smatraju baštinu Stonea i Campbella dijelom svojega povijesnog/teološkog interesa, ali ne i važnu u svakodnevnom životu. Umjesto toga, naglasak je na Gospodinu Isusu i njegovoj Riječi. Rezultati predstavljeni u ovom članku temelje se prvenstveno na svjedočanstvima očevidaca sakupljenim u intervjuima i dopisivanju elektroničkom poštom.