Protestant Adjustments After the Break-Up of Yugoslavia

Bill Yoder
1. Lutherans Struggle with Political Loyalties

The Lutheran churches of Croatia and Serbia are politically more different than similar: Croatian Lutherans regard themselves as natives, are highly patriotic, and display with pride the coat and arms of the new Croatian state. Lutherans in the northern Serbian province of Voyvodina though are more within than a part of the Serbian state. They are a part of the Slovak minority and hold their church life in the Slovak language.

According to Senior Vlado Deutsch, head of the Zagreb-based Croatian church, Lutheranism does appeal to some seekers who "identify neither with Catholic, Orthodox or Muslim traditions." Yet there are virtually no Lutherans of Serbian origin. Relations between Zagreb and the Slovak church headquartered in Novi Sad, Voyvodina are strained. Croatian Lutherans applaud the Lutheran World Federation's December appeal for Western military intervention and the tightening of international sanctions against Serbia. On both of these points, Voyvodina Lutherans take the opposing view. German recommendations that the Serbian Orthodox Church be banished from the World Council of Churches (WCC) enjoy strong Croatian support. The Lutheran Bishop, Andrej Beredi of Novi Sad, counters, "That would be the wrong move." Beredi attributes the pro-Croatian stance of the Zagreb church to the power of propaganda: "One should only believe 50% of that which one hears in Croatian or in our own media." Professor Gerald Shenk, an Austrian-based Mennonite peace researcher from Virginia, concludes Western media have a pro-Croatian slant and describes the WCC's pro-Serbian tendencies as a "corrective bias." Croatians hold such views to be outrageous: They are convinced that war guilt is primarily Serbian. The Protestants of Serbia though are equally certain that guilt is essentially equal.

Yugoslav contacts across the war frontier barely exist. Voyvodina youth leaders resent a Lutheran youth conference in Vienna last Summer: Slovak participants from the Serb Voyvodina believe Croatian delegates shunned them as 'Serbs.' Fear for the morrow is rampant in the Voyvodina. The Voyvodina, which has a minority population of 35%, possesses large Hungarian, Romanian, and Slovak minorities who do not exclude the
possibility of eventual "ethnic cleansing." These minorities feel especially threatened by the legal and illegal actions of extremist Serbian factions and gangs. Ludmilla Beredi, the daughter of the Bishop, states, "We get along well with those Serbs who have been here for several centuries. But many newcomers since World War II, including the recent refugees from Bosnia, have hate in their hearts."

Bishop Beredi steers a cautious course regarding military duty by church members. "It would be highly problematic if all Lutherans or Slovaks would refuse to carry weapons," he warns. "The government would immediately interpret that as an anti-Serbian step." Life is consequently easier for multiethnic congregations with Serbian majorities such as the Pentecostals and the Adventists. The Baptist church in Novi Sad, for example, has seven different nationalities. These small churches readily take advantage of opportunities to do alternative civilian service or non-combatant service within the army. Thanks in part to the Serbian draft, many young Slovak men are emigrating to Slovakia. The Lutheran Bishop of Slovakia, Pavel Uhorskai, conceded, "We do not lure them into coming, but neither do we prevent them from staying here. We have over 100 vacant pastoral positions ourselves." The Lutherans of Slovakia are the strongest supporters of Slovak Lutheranism in Serbia. Despite obstacles placed by Serbian custom officials, two literature shipments recently arrived. Churches in Serbia are too poor to fund the publishing of Christian literature presently. Inflation is running as high as several percentage points daily. An average monthly salary in December was valued at $44; in January it was down to $25. Rev. Dragoslav Strajnić, a Pentecostal pastor who returned to Serbia from France in 1989, stated in desperation, "We're here and we're ready to work, but we're not being given the financial means to do our job. We believers are not making the war, and we should not be punished with sanctions. There is no justification for ignoring us because we are not responsible for this war." For the first time since World War II the churches in all of Yugoslavia are finally free to do social and youth work without massive government intervention. Yet present economic restrictions have kept most projects from being realized. "Fortunately," Bishop Beredi added, "most of our congregations are rural. In hard times it's easier to survive in the countryside." According to Bishop Uhorskai, who visited the Voyvodina in November, 1992, rural orientation is a mixed blessing: The church in the Voyvodina has developed little work among the intelligentsia and with young people. "They're where we were 80 or a 100 years ago," he concluded. On paper, Voyvodina Lutherans have 51,000 members, making them the largest Protestant denomination in all of ex-Yugoslavia. Membership of the Croatian church is listed as nearly 5,000, though there are less than 1,000 active members.
2. The Evangelicals' Attempted Adjustment

The controversy surrounding Peter Kuzmič, ex-Yugoslavia's most prominent Protestant theologian, symbolizes well the political tension between evangelical groups in Croatia and Serbia. At the beginning of the year Kuzmič proposed military strikes by the West against Serbian positions. A month before, Gunnar Staalsett, General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, had proposed a similar course of action. Though the Pentecostal theologian's comments (he resides in Osijek, Croatia) enjoyed virtually unanimous support in Croatia, he reaped a storm of protest in Serbia. He was attacked by the secular Serbian press, but one of the sharpest retorts stemmed from Lazar Stojsić, a minister in Belgrade's flourishing Pentecostal congregation, Hram Svete Trojice [Temple of the Holy Trinity]: "Kuzmič reminds me of a person with bombs in one hand and prayers in the other. He needs to be converted." The Baptist Professor Alexander Birviš, a former colleague of Kuzmič at the Pentecostal seminary in Osijek and now a pastor in Belgrade, added: "I wonder whether Kuzmic would be demanding the same if his daughter were living in Belgrade." Copies of Izvori [Springs or Sources], an evangelical magazine published in Osijek, are donated to Hram Svete Trojice. "We don't distribute the magazine," assured Stojsić. "If unbelievers would see this magazine, they would assume we're allied with Croatia and the Catholics."

Superintendent Martin Hovan, the highest-ranking Methodist in all of ex-Yugoslavia, who resides in Novi Sad, Serbia, insisted: "The Germanic race is attacking us. It wants to divide us up, so we can be defeated. Today, the Vatican is attacking Orthodoxy, but tomorrow, it could be us, the Protestants." Croatian believers support the tightening of international sanctions against Serbia as well as recommendations that the Serbian Orthodox Church be banished from the World Council of Churches. On both of these points Serbian evangelicals take the opposing view. Croatians are convinced that war guilt is primarily Serbian. The Protestants of Serbia though are equally certain that guilt is essentially equal.

Distance from government policies is greater among Serbian Christians, yet in both cases the churches have taken positions which do not endanger their relations with the state. Serbian Pentecostals and Adventists practice overtly pacifist positions, but they do not take public issue with political policies of the Serbian state. Hram Svete Trojice reported proudly of its plans to utilize the Serbian Army choir in a major Belgrade hall as a prelude to Billy Graham's video messages during the European ProChrist campaign in late March. Pressure to conform is extremely harsh in both states. According to Peter MacKenzie, a Zagreb-based missionary from Scotland, Baptists in Serb-held territories who differ with their state defend themselves with 'other-worldliness.' "I think they're right," added MacKenzie, "not because Christians who get involved in politics are carnal in principle, but because in such a difficult situation it is the best means available to glorify God and to promote the advancement of the
Gospel. Croats think Serbs should stand up and condemn their own leaders, and Serbs think Croats should do the same. But neither is at this point prepared to do that."

In Serbia multiethnic congregations with Serbian majorities enjoy the greatest political leeway. The Baptist church in Novi Sad, for example, has seven different nationalities. Ethnic monolithic churches such as the Slovak Lutheran or the Hungarian Reformed are under much greater pressure. Bishop Andrej Beredi of the Slovak Lutheran church explained, "It would be highly problematic if all Lutherans or Slovaks would refuse to carry weapons. The government would immediately interpret that as an anti-Serbian step." Though the evangelicals of ex-Yugoslavia are not equipped to play a role as political mediators, they do possess other means for promoting peace. In places such as the destroyed city of Pakrac, Croatia, multiethnic congregations including both Croatian and Serbian converts are being formed. "The fact that Serbs are joining our churches means they regard us to be peacemakers," concluded MacKenzie. "In fact, we are on occasion accused of being 'Chetnik' churches."

Humanitarian aid is an additional means for promoting the concern for peace. The 1,500 Baptists of Croatia administer two of ex-Yugoslavia's largest church relief agencies. In Serbia the most widely-respected church relief agency, ADRA, is run by the 9,000-member Adventist church. Because it has small congregations spread throughout the entire country, it was able to develop a distribution network unrivaled by any other church. "Our network is in place everywhere," stated Adventist President Jovan Lorencin proudly. Even the national Serbian Orthodox relief agency, Dobrotvor, needed to resort to Adventist channels to ship aid into all sectors of Sarajevo.

Especially in Serbia crass economic hardships abound. Though Serb-held territories contain nearly as many refugees as Croatia, they are receiving no more than a fourth of all church aid directed towards Yugoslavia. For the first time since World War II, the churches in all of Yugoslavia are free to do social and youth work without government intervention. Yet present economic restrictions have kept most projects from being realized. Churches in Serbia are too poor to fund the publishing of Christian literature. Relief work has placed evangelicals on the political map of Yugoslavia for the first time. Božidar Karlović, a lay Baptist pastor in Pakrac, reported of municipal support for his efforts to construct a 300-seat chapel. "We live in a Catholic country," he explained, "but right now they need us. It is therefore important that we strike now while the iron is hot."

Despite general feelings of desertion among Serbian evangelicals, mission work appears to be flourishing in Belgrade. The capital city hosts nearly 15 North American missionaries, including Southern Baptists and Campus Crusade. Greater Europe Mission is planning to move its seminary there from Vienna. The welcome among nationals though is mixed, for
the installment of a new seminary could dry up the small pool of candidates now attending the existing Baptist seminary 50 miles to the northwest in Novi Sad.

3. Lutheran World Federation Aid in Croatia

The Lutheran World Federation's relief project for Croatia and Bosnia intends to make its mark through innovation rather than size: Its annual budget has not exceeded two million dollars. Its twin goals are increasing the "absorptive capacities" of existing housing and returning people to self-sufficiency. According to Dr. John Wood, the LWF Country Coordinator residing in Zagreb, "We must return as many people to normalcy now, before the international community and media have tired of the Yugoslav question." Concepts are more important than size. "Do we assist people now, or do we rather help them work their way out of a bad situation," he asks. "We have produced some models that can serve as a catalyst for larger programs." According to Wood the German government spent $32 million to house nearly 5,000 people in prefabricated housing, yet LWF has been able to house 2,000 refugees in Neum, Herzegovina, simply by restoring the broken glass in two tourist hotels. Total cost for this project approaches $200,000. Wood is concerned that foodstuffs now be "prepositioned" in Bosnia for the coming winter. Many persons only became refugees because they were cut off from normal supply channels. "It's a pity that so many donor programs don't have a mandate to stop people from becoming refugees," he laments, "but only to help those who have already become refugees." In villages south of Osijek in northeastern Croatia, Wood's models can be most readily examined. In Ivanovac residents are repairing a school with LWF supplies. "We need families to return to the destroyed villages, and the opening of schools is a great incentive for them to return," explained Hermina Nikolaisen, German head of the LWF-office in Osijek. Free seed is also a major inducement for farmers: In Ivanovac and Nustar, which is near the destroyed city of Vukovar, LWF is supplying most of the seed required for this year's crop. The LWF is donating building materials to restore dwellings only yards removed from the Serbian front lines in UN-controlled areas. "It would be moral and emotional torture to force these people to keep on waiting," Nikolaisen claimed. "They want to start rebuilding now, even if the war's outcome is far from certain." Nikolaisen, only the second LWF worker in Croatia, described the identification of needy families to be her most trying hurdle.

 Thankfully local Catholic clergymen have helped identify the needy and oversee the distribution of LWF-sponsored supplies. Unfortunately, relations between LWF and the Croatian Lutheran church, which has its own relief agency, remain troubled. Senior Vlado Deutsch, the head of Croatian Lutherans, criticizes the fact that Wood, a native of British Columbia, is neither Croatian nor Lutheran. Rev. Deutsch explained: "We think some of
their people are unqualified. They have people who've done relief work in Somalia or Bangladesh who come here and attempt to work with the same methods. One shouldn't do that, these people don't understand us."

Nevertheless, LWF has been named the primary church relief coordinator for all Croatian-controlled territories; its counterpart in Serb-held territories is International Orthodox Christian Charity (IOCC), a relief agency of Orthodox churches based outside of Serbia. Although Serbian-held territories hold approximately 800,000 refugees--Croatia hosts over a million--Serbian agencies have been receiving no more than one-fourth of all church-sponsored relief aid. Finally in February Lutherans in Serbia helped found "Ecumenical Humanitarian Aid," a relief agency working under the umbrella of the ecumenical council of Serbia. It will be based in Lutheran headquarters in Novi Sad, Voyvodina. Dr. Andrej Beredi explained that this new agency will be ready to aid relief convoys when they appear at Serbian customs stations. It also intends to help refugees from Bosnia now living in Serbia; Bishop Beredi assured though that the agency hopes "to aid all those who are living in great need." Pensioners, who need to survive on a fixed income in an extremely inflationary economy, will be among their target groups. Bill Steele, a Southern Baptist missionary from Georgia now living in Belgrade, maintained that relief efforts in Serbia lag at least a half year behind those in Croatia. "Serbian efforts are still restricted to food distribution," he explained, "but Croatian agencies have begun with food production. Six months ago, Croatia had more refugees and consequently greater relief needs, but recently the needs among Bosnian Serbs have increased significantly."

The most respected church relief agency in Serbia, ADRA, is run by the 9,000-member Adventist church. Because it has small congregations spread throughout the entire country, it was able to quickly develop a distribution network unrivaled by any other church. Even the national Serbian Orthodox relief agency, Dobrotvor, resorted to Adventist channels in order to ship aid to Sarajevo. Thanks to a dearth of foreign aid, ADRA has been most active in transporting food parcel gifts from families in Belgrade to their relatives in all parts of Sarajevo. Rev. Jovan Lorencin, President of the Adventist church, notes that "Dobrotvor can send aid only as far as Serbian military lines reach." Yet, due to the fact that 3,000 additional Adventists live in Croatia and possess political contacts there, ADRA has been able to ship across battle lines. Agencies, such as World Vision and the Southern Baptist relief effort, want to divide their aid 50-50 between Croatian- and Serbian-held territories. John Wood though takes a different tack. "This is a complicated moral issue," he concedes. "If everyone else has been kicked out of a Serb-held territory, should one then make it as comfortable as possible for those who have done the kicking? Many Croatians would see this simply as rewarding the Serbs for the atrocities they have been committing."