

Bosnia

A call to obedience

BY KIRK NOONAN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY GAYLON WAMPLER

Y

ou did not want to live in Sarajevo in the 1990s. Mortar rounds rocked buildings, shattering windows, igniting fires and spraying chunks of concrete and debris. Snipers from hilltops mercilessly picked off citizens — even women and children. Thousands of residents escaped bullets and bombs only to succumb to malnutrition and disease.

Sarajevo was not the only crisis point. Nearly 200,000 people died and close to 3 million were left homeless throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina before the civil war ended.

Walking through the streets of downtown Sarajevo, the nation’s capital, it is not hard to imagine the terror citizens endured. Walls are still riddled with bullet holes. Rusty rebar juts like boney fingers from buildings where artillery struck. Bombed-out sidewalks have been repaired with reddish cement to serve as reminders of the war — as if such reminders were needed.

Despite a measure of peace in Bosnia since the war’s end, an uneasy tension remains between Serbs, who are predominantly Eastern Orthodox; Croats, mostly Catholic; and ethnic Muslims.

The division in the city of Mostar exemplifies the fragile alliance among two of the groups. Ethnic Muslims live on the east side, Catholic Croats on the west.

In such a complicated country there seems little room to add another point of view to the mix. But for several years a small yet resilient group of evangelicals have been painstakingly fulfilling the Great Commission, one person at a time. Two years ago the Assemblies of God sent missionaries Jason and Tracey Parnell to Bosnia to help the Evangelical Church of Bosnia and Herzegovina with the development of local and national youth ministries.

The Parnells’ story illustrates how God can bless a family, a fellowship and even a country when obedience to His calling transcends human perspective.

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Bombed-out buildings in Mostar





From left: Michael, Jason, Emily, Victoria and Tracey



Jason Parnell visits with Pastor Bernard Mikulić.



Michael Parnell

SPOKEN

“I know where we’re going,” Michael Parnell, then 8 years old, said as he burst through the front door of the family’s home in Dayton, Texas. “We’re going to Bosnia!”

Jason and Tracey looked at their son. It was a warm Sunday afternoon in October 2002. For months the family had prayed God would show them where He wanted them to go as missionaries. They leaned toward Europe, but Bosnia was never considered.

“Michael, what makes you say that?” Jason asked.

“We learned about it in children’s church today. Our teacher said they don’t have any missionaries there. We’re going to be missionaries — so that’s it! That’s where we’re going!” responded Michael sincerely.

“They recently had a war there,” explained Jason, trying not to squelch his son’s enthusiasm. “I really don’t think there is any way they’ll send us to Bosnia.”

At that point, Jason and Tracey dismissed the idea and chalked up the discussion to Michael having heard a good missions story. But over the next few weeks God began to confirm what Michael said.

A few days later, Jason picked up the October 2002 *World Missions Edition of Today’s Pentecostal Evangel*. As he read an interview with Greg Mundis, Europe regional director for Assemblies of God World Missions, he learned Greg was praying someone would step forward to go to Bosnia as a missionary.

“It seemed like it could have been a confirmation of what Michael said,” Jason admits. “But we still weren’t excited about taking our children to a war zone.”

At the end of October, Jason and Tracey traveled to AG headquarters in Springfield, Missouri, to meet with the World Missions Executive Committee.

Their lives would never be the same.

TORN APART

Four years earlier, God began putting His plan in motion. In 1998 an AG media team traveled to Bosnia with Greg to assess what could be done to support the 500 evangelical believers there. The team was overwhelmed by the physical, emotional and spiritual needs the civil war had caused.

Outsiders cannot adequately comprehend the historic conflict in Bosnia, wrote Randy Hurst, director of World Missions Communications, in the May 3, 1998, *World Missions Edition*. *The former Yugoslavia was a complex country with six republics, two autonomous regions, and five Slavic nationalities. Three main religious groups were prominent — Serbian and Macedonian Eastern Orthodox, Croat and Slovenian Catholics, and Bosnian and Albanian Muslims. ... The tension and animosity in this complex environment have risen and subsided but have never gone away. ... This is a dark place. In contrast are the Christian believers who fulfill their Lord's words, "Ye are the light of the world," (Matthew 5:14). ... Prior to the war that erupted in April 1992, only a few dozen born-again believers could be found in all of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the least evangelized country in Europe.*

That last fact disturbed Greg. As the team visited a bombed-out apartment complex, he began praying aloud. He prayed for protection and provision for the people of Bosnia and asked God to send missionaries who would support the small but growing national church and help fulfill the Great Commission.

"That prayer burden lasted five years," Greg admits. "I brought it before committees, put the need before readers in *Today's Pentecostal Evangel* and preached it from the pulpit. I was deeply concerned we did not have a missionary presence in Bosnia."

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A bridge to a new start

It's Tuesday night in Mostar, a city two hours outside Sarajevo. Jason Parnell escapes the chilly night air and enters Club New Bridge. Several teens are seated near a large television, playing video games. Behind them three teenage girls sit at a table, chatting. In another corner, a volunteer pours sodas for thirsty students.

Teens and 20-somethings come here to take part in free music, computer and English classes, and spend their evenings in a safe environment with friends. But what sets this ministry apart from others is that it caters to students from a myriad of religious and ethnic backgrounds, including Catholics, Muslims, Eastern Orthodox, Gypsies, refugees and even atheists.

"Society tells them not to get mixed up with people who are not like them," says Karin Antoni, a worker at Club New Bridge. "We bring them together so they can see kids from different backgrounds are just like them and have the same problems."

It seems to work.

"I come here because I don't want to be alone anymore," says Andrea, 18. "Most teens in Bosnia have dropped out and forgotten God because they feel He has forgotten them."

Many Bosnian teens struggle with alcoholism, drug abuse, hopelessness and suicide. Despite the grim realities, Jason is optimistic.

"From my perspective, teens and 20-somethings are part of the generation that has the potential to bring change to this country," he says. "It's going to take a generation who will stand up to the fighting and politics and say, 'No, we don't want to live like this anymore.' But to have the strength to do that, they need the power of the Holy Spirit."





The Parnells at the Church of the Gospel in Sarajevo.

Sarah Baumgartner

Sarah grew up in Africa as a missionary kid, so her family was not surprised when she followed her parents' footsteps into the mission field. Though becoming a missionary associate at age 21 — when most of her peers are still in college — is rare, Sarah sees it as an opportunity of a lifetime.

"It's an incredible experience and expands your worldview," she says of going to the mission field. "It forces you to a new dependence on God and allows you to have an adventure with Him and reach out to people in ways you never imagined."

In Bosnia, she is helping the Parnells in youth ministry.



A STIRRING

A few months after Greg returned from Bosnia, Jason and Tracey took their youth group from Old River Assembly of God to a South Texas District youth conference. Throughout the conference they prayed God would touch the teens' lives and even call some of them into ministry.

During the last service of the conference, the speaker said there were 44 missionaries from the South Texas District. "Who is going to be number 45?" he asked.

The question gripped Jason and Tracey. They wept as they sensed God's calling to world missions that night. They pursued the calling faithfully, but cautiously.

The following summer the Parnells took a missions trip to Equatorial Guinea. "It was such a difficult trip," confesses Jason. "We came home hesitant about pursuing the process of becoming missionaries."

Meanwhile, Greg continued to pray God would send an AG missionary to Bosnia. He knew the country was reeling from war. Breaking through the many cultural and religious barriers would not be easy for a missionary. Yet he also knew the people of Bosnia needed to hear about Jesus Christ and His love and redemption.

But no one answered Greg's pleas or even expressed interest.

Two years after returning from Equatorial Guinea, Jason and Tracey attended a missions convention. During one of the services, they went forward to pray for AG missionaries.

"As we prayed, we wept and felt the presence of the Holy Spirit," says Jason. "Once again God told us He wanted us to be missionaries."

Within months the Parnells embarked on the formal process of becoming missionaries. Their only question was where in Europe God was sending them.

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Drummer boy

When the war started, 11-year-old Sabahudin and his family became refugees. During the war his father fought on the front lines, his mother was imprisoned and his sister vanished. There was very little to eat and no hope the war would end anytime soon.

"I didn't have a childhood," Sabahudin says. "Hatred grew in my heart."

When the war ended, his sister came back home. She had escaped to Germany where she met Christians and committed her life to Jesus.

"When she came home I saw something different in her," Sabahudin says. "She called on the name of Jesus, but I told her not to mention that Name in my house."

Soon his mother accepted Christ too, and in 1997 his sister was baptized in water. Sabahudin felt they had betrayed their people, their religion and their nation. But when his sister invited him to a Christian summer camp, he went reluctantly.

"There I saw three groups [Serbs, Croats and ethnic Muslims] worshipping one Lord," he says. "I asked, 'Who is this God who can put all this together?'"

That year he committed his life to Christ and found an unexpected gift. "God gave me a desire to learn to play instruments," he says. "Within two months I could play well enough to lead worship."

A naturally gifted musician, Sabahudin suddenly found himself courted by professional rock bands. He decided to join a band so he could hone his skills and make money, but he soon found himself playing for all the wrong reasons.

"My heart became stone hard against God," he says. "The fame went to my head. I walked away from my faith and began hating Christians."

Through much prayer by his Christian friends, Sabahudin eventually returned to his faith. When he did, he threw away all of his secular CDs and even his instruments, vowing never to play music again because it had taken him away from God. But at a Christian camp, he was asked to play in the worship band. Since then he has used his skills to worship God and teaches others to do the same at Club New Bridge.

Though he is quick to share his faith with others, Sabahudin also warns young people the Christian life won't always be easy.

"You'll have trouble. It's a tough life," he says of being a Christian in Bosnia. "But I've also learned it's worth it."



Buddy and Kristi Draper with their daughters Mackenzie and Madison will serve in Serbia.



Timing is everything

Twenty-five years passed from the time Buddy Draper was called to be a missionary and when he was sent. He has no regrets.

“No matter if there is a delay between when God calls us and when He sends us, we have to continue following His call and waiting on His timetable,” he says.

Now in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Buddy and his wife, Kristi, will assist the Parnells and learn the language. When their language training is finished, they plan to move to Serbia and minister.

Buddy has this advice for anyone who feels called but is afraid to embrace missions: “Try something new; you’ll see a great response from God.”



OBEDIENCE

During several days of orientation, missionary candidates meet with the director of the region to which they feel called. Because Jason and Tracey felt drawn to Europe, they were scheduled to meet with Greg and his wife, Sandra. During the meeting the Mundises quizzed Jason and Tracey about where they thought they should serve. The Parnells shared their passion for ministry but admitted they were not sure where they should go.

“Is there anything else you can tell us that might help us to narrow it down for you?” Sandra asked.

Tracey tearfully told how Michael had come home from church and said they were going to serve in Bosnia. “As she shared the story, the presence of the Holy Spirit filled the room,” says Jason. Greg and Sandra were also moved by the story, but they wanted to be sure Jason and Tracey were positive the Lord was calling them there.

“I wanted to test them,” Greg says. “I told them they would be lonely, the national church was just developing, there were hardly any believers in the country, there was a lot of conflict and it was a very tense situation.”

He then told them of other opportunities in Europe, adding, “We never like to tell candidates where they should go, because when you get there you have to know God called you there.”

At the end of the meeting the Mundises told Jason and Tracey to pray about Bosnia and let them know what they felt. Later Jason confided to Tracey that his head was telling him to go somewhere else, but his heart was telling him to go to Bosnia.

“After we talked with the Mundises, the Lord gave us peace and confirmed in our hearts He was calling us to Bosnia,” Tracey says.

IN COUNTRY

In January 2005, Jason, Tracey and their three children arrived in Bosnia. They have focused their ministry on reaching teens and 20-somethings with the gospel.

“When we sensed a calling to missions, we thought we would be leaving youth ministry,” Jason says. “But when we got here, all we could see was young people.”

Besides helping build a youth ministry, Jason and Tracey spend considerable time encouraging national church leaders and learning the complex language and culture.

“Jason is a great guy who is passionate about young people,” says Sabahudin, a Christian musician who works with youth. “He has a heart for the people of Bosnia. I pray God would give me a heart like that.”

Other leaders concur.

Sasha Nikolinovic, pastor of Evangelical Church of Sarajevo, has spent considerable time with Jason and admires the way he is adjusting to life in Bosnia. He says the Parnells have put forth much effort to build strong relationships with the nationals and learn the language.

“Jason and Tracey have determined to do what it takes to become established as missionaries here,” he says. “They have a future in Bosnia.”

Greg Mundis says during his time as Europe regional director he has learned obedience precedes miracles. Jason and Tracey were obedient, he says, in spite of their fears of taking their family to a difficult place. Now the time is ripe for a miracle in Bosnia — the kind of miracle that will see people commit their lives to Jesus Christ and forever change a country. **tpe**

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E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.



A changed life

Mirella, 20, is a bright college student who learned English watching *Sesame Street* and Cartoon Network. As a child she committed her life to Christ, but as a teenager her friends pressured her to convert to another religion. As with many of her peers, Mirella drank alcohol, smoked and did drugs.

Two years ago she met a woman on the street who also spoke English. They became fast friends, and during the course of their friendship the woman told her about Jesus.

“I began to realize what the truth was again,” Mirella says. “Three months ago I accepted Jesus into my life again and I am happy about that. I never want to go back to where I was, and I am sorry all these people were here at church and I wasn’t.”

TPE media team:
Kirk Noonan and
photographer Gaylon
Wampler in front of a
bombed-out apartment
complex in Mostar.

