

MONTENEGRO

the Light dawns in a new nation

By Randy Hurst

As we wind through scenic mountains in Montenegro, Jovica's personal story unfolds in pieces as he passionately shares his vision for the spiritually lost of this small, picturesque nation on the Adriatic Sea.

Photography by Jess Heugel and Randy Hurst



“Belgrade, Serbia is more than 300 miles from here and there is not one evangelical church between here and there,” Jovica* says. “That breaks my heart, but I do have hope.”

Even on this clear sunny day, it’s a bit hard to focus on the stunning landscape around us because Jovica’s story and enthusiastic personality are so captivating. As he excitedly shares his burden for this nation, I think back to the tiny church building we had just visited in Podgorica, Montenegro’s capital, before leaving on our journey to the coast. It is incredible how few born-again Christian believers live in this part of Europe.

I am accompanying Europe Regional Director Greg Mundis and Southeastern Europe Area Director Kevin Beery. Part of the Europe region’s mission statement is to “accelerate the spread of the gospel.” That is what Greg and Kevin have come to seek ways to do in this newly formed country. Montenegro officially became a nation in 2006. A part of Yugoslavia since 1918, it was the last of that nation’s republics to break away and form an independent country.

Jovica is taking us on a two-hour drive to the coast in his tiny car. Though the church he pastors in Podgorica has only 32 baptized members, Jovica has a vision to start another church in the coastal town of Kamenari. For more than two years, he has traveled to northern Montenegro near the Kosovo border (a three-hour drive from his home), ministering in three refugee camps to Serbians, Slavic Muslims, and Gypsies from Kosovo.

Along the highway we pass a billboard with a huge picture of Madonna. I ask Jovica why it is there. He explains that the government is spending more than \$6 million to bring Madonna for a concert. The sole purpose is to draw attention to the

* Pronounced “Yoveetsa”



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small country because government leaders believe tourism is the greatest hope for the economy.

Montenegro, like much of Europe, exhibits vestiges of a Christian past. Though Christian symbolism is visible, however, it is relegated merely to architecture. No evangelical church existed in Montenegro until 1996. That year Dusan Kljaic, a graduate of Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek, Croatia, came to establish a congregation. By 1999 he felt he had done all he could and asked Jovica, who attended seminary with him, to fill in at the church for just three months.

Jovica was already involved in ministry at his home church in Novi Sad, Serbia. Being a Serb, he had no desire to work with Montenegrins. In fact, he resented them. He told God the last place he would minister was Montenegro. But because of his friend, he agreed to make the 370-mile trip by train each week and hold Sunday morning services. The first Sunday when he arrived, he found only eight people in a small basement room Dusan had rented.

At the time, Jovica and his wife, Savka, were expecting their first child. Savka often fretted that Jovica would be gone when the baby was born, but Jovica repeatedly promised that he would not miss such an important event. It was a promise he was unable to fulfill.

One Sunday he received a phone call in Montenegro, informing him that Savka had gone into labor earlier than expected. When his first son, Jovan, was born, Jovica was far away. After the services he set out on the long train ride back to

Novi Sad, feeling despondent over letting his wife down and angry at missing the joy of being present when his first child was born. He wondered if the sacrifice was worth it, since the struggling little church in Podgorica showed no signs of growth.

"I was just keeping those same eight people barely alive spiritually," Jovica said. "They looked at me with such hungry eyes."

As Jovica fought an inner battle, the Spirit spoke to him. He showed Jovica that nothing would really change until he had a genuine love for Montenegrins. That began a change in his heart that replaced his prejudice with love — not only for Montenegrins' souls, but also for them as people. It transformed his ministry and confirmed God's call on his life to Montenegro.

It is difficult to understand our own prejudices and even harder to comprehend someone else's. Until the Bosnian war from 1992 until 1995 and the subsequent Kosovo conflict in 1998 and 1999, most Americans had little awareness or understanding of the intense, long-standing hostilities in the former Yugoslavia.



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The apostle Paul said that the gospel is the “power of God for salvation [to everyone who believes].” (Romans 1:16) That includes being saved not only from the eternal penalty for sin, but also from its power in our lives. Prejudice is sin that is rooted in self-centeredness. The simplistic views of prejudice in our culture have focused primarily on racism based on skin color. Civil conflicts in recent years — such as the genocide in Rwanda, the war in Bosnia, and the crises in the Middle East and Northern Ireland — do not arise from color-bias but from hostilities that trace back hundreds of years. Outsiders can’t identify with them. And current generations have assimilated them — even if they don’t understand their origins. Only the gospel, the grace of God and the Spirit’s power can change hearts and break the cycle.

Jovica’s evident passion for reaching Montenegro makes me curious about his past. I ask about his childhood. He tells me he is from a poor family in Novi Sad, Serbia. His father worked in a factory and his mother cleaned houses as they struggled to feed their family of five. Their home had only one room and a kitchen. Jovica slept with his parents and sister in one bed; his grandmother slept in the kitchen.

At school, the other children teased Jovica because he was poor. Angry and resentful, Jovica promised himself that he would be the best at something — even if it was something bad. He started sniffing glue, and by age 13 he was drinking alcohol and listening to American heavy metal music. Over the next 10 years he became increasingly violent and abusive. At times he even beat his parents to force them to give him money for alcohol.

When he was 23, Jovica threatened to throw his parents from the third floor of their apartment building if they didn’t give him money. Even he was frightened by the intensity of his rage. Panicked, he left home, in part to protect his family. He moved in with a friend with a similar lifestyle.



Jovica performing a baby dedication



Regional director for Europe, Greg Mundis, missionary Kevin Beery and Jovica stand in front of the trailer where the church holds Sunday School

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One day while lying on a bed reading a comic book, Jovica glanced up and saw a Bible on a shelf. His roommate never attended church, yet his believing mother had given him a Bible. Jovica had never seen a Bible, and while he felt drawn to it he did not touch it. He knew it was a holy Book, and he definitely was not holy.

An overwhelming desire to read it grew inside him. Finally, he picked it up. As he did, he thought, *If I read this, I will change. Am I ready to be changed?* Jovica started reading in the Old Testament. When his roommate saw him, he said, "Don't read it from the beginning. You will not understand anything. Read the New Testament."

Jovica found the New Testament and started reading. As he did, he recalled pictures and icons of Jesus he had seen as a young boy. They showed Jesus as a baby and hanging on a cross. Jovica had grown up thinking of Jesus as someone powerless and helpless. But as he read the Gospels, he says, "Jesus came alive to me."

When Jovica read Jesus' prayer in Luke 23:34, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing," the Holy Spirit convicted his heart, and he started to cry. He remembered how he had hurt his parents, how he was often in a drug- or alcohol-induced stupor. *Jesus can't be for me, he thought. I am too bad.* Then he remembered other words of Jesus he had read: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. ... I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matthew 9:12,13: NIV).

As a child, Jovica had learned the Lord's Prayer from his grandmother. Overwhelmed with a desire to know God, he began to repeat it. When he finished, he continued to pour out his heart.

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After he repented of his sins, the first thing he wanted to do was apologize to his parents.

"Please forgive me," he pleaded. "Jesus forgave me, and I ask you to forgive me, too."

Initially they were unconvinced, assuming he was just playing a game in another attempt to get money.

Undeterred, Jovica kept seeking after God. He knew nothing about church, but he felt suddenly impressed to find an old friend named Chaga. He had no idea that Chaga was also a new believer and had begun attending a small Pentecostal church in Novi Sad.

This church wasn't like any Jovica had ever heard about. Young people met together in a house to play guitars and sing songs of worship to Jesus. The pastor, Aleksander Mitrovic, introduced Jovica and Chaga to AG missionary Peter Kuzmic, who invited them to attend

Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek, Croatia. At the school, Jovica's passion for souls grew. He had no idea that the Spirit was preparing him to carry the gospel to people toward whom he had inherited hostilities from childhood.

Jesus likened the kingdom of God to a mustard seed — small and seemingly insignificant but containing life that will grow and multiply. Throughout Christian history, seasons of spiritual harvest have sprung from small beginnings. God prepares the soil even before the seed is sown, even as He prepares laborers to sow the message and harvest the results.

The apostle Paul's Jewish background and character made him an unlikely messenger to the decadent Roman colony of Corinth. Similarly, Jovica, a Serb, was not a probable candidate to evangelize Montenegro. But the Lord of the harvest chose to manifest His

wisdom and grace in Jovica's life. He and his wife, Savka, are telling examples of how the Lord shapes the destiny of His servants. Often He chooses people whose personal history or culture would by nature be a hindrance to a particular group of people, yet He empowers them for effective ministry.

While heading to the airport to leave Montenegro, I listen as Jovica pleads with Greg and Kevin to send missionaries. Fewer than 130 people attend only three small evangelical congregations in this country of more than 700,000. Montenegro is a difficult mission field. But even in hard soil there is good ground, and missionaries are desperately needed.

We pass another giant billboard advertising the Madonna concert, and I envision the huge crowds that will gather. Then I think about the 50 people who will gather in Jovica's church to worship on Sunday ... and of the hundreds of

thousands of Montenegrins to whom Jesus is, at most, only a cultural icon of its past. I wonder how few Christians in America know that a country in Europe exists in which only one in more than 5,000 know Christ as their personal Savior.

I glance over at Jovica behind the wheel — the fervent and committed pastor who prays for missionaries to come and proclaim the message of Christ. In a very dark place a small light is that much more visible.

The apostle John wrote that Jesus is "the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man" (John 1:9, NASB). Though only a few in Montenegro have seen that Light, it has dawned and will continue to shine. **tpe**

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