

Skyline's Journey: Adopting a People in Croatia

by Timothy Elmore

I recently heard an amusing story about a class of young police cadets who were taking their final exam before becoming actual officers on the police force. The instructor informed them it would be an oral examination. He then proceeded to describe an absolutely desperate situation in an urban setting. He said: "Imagine that you look to your left and you see a young boy drowning in a lake. Suddenly, you hear a woman scream, and you see her being mugged and robbed right behind you. Almost simultaneously, the First National Bank catches on fire on your right. Crowds gather to watch, and as they do, looters begin to pick pockets of anyone they can! A car pulling up to take pictures crashes into a fire hydrant, several people are injured!" The instructor then paused, and looked at his class of young, potential cops. "Your exam question," he said, "is simply this: What would you do in that situation?" After careful thought, each student responded, but the best response, came from the young man who answered last. His response was: "Remove uniform. Mingle with crowd."

Sometimes I wonder if that hasn't been the Church's response to the desperate situation the world finds itself in today. We are overwhelmed when we hear there are billions who still have not heard of Christ. Then, there's the hunger in Asia and Africa, and the instances of ethnic cleansing in the Middle East and Central Europe. Many Christians simply remove the little silver "fish" pin from their collars, and begin to mingle with the crowd. It's much easier that way.

A few years ago, Skyline Wesleyan

Church decided we couldn't do that any longer as we looked at the needs of the world around us. We made a quality decision that, while we may not impact the entire world of unreached people, we could, at least, adopt one people group at a time and begin to make a difference. My objective, in this article, is to communicate some practical steps a local church may take in adopting an unreached people group, and to illustrate those steps with the Skyline's journey.

Just as God selected one people group in Genesis 12 to bless and be a blessing to all the nations of the earth, we began our journey to see that our church could be mobilized more effectively by focusing on one people group, rather than becoming overwhelmed with the needs of the some 2.5 billion unreached people on earth.

Steps in our Journey

1. We first of all determined the Outreach Quotient (O.Q.) of our church family. This was done by examining the pieces of the world mission puzzle already in place at the church. We asked ourselves: Where is the people's heart right now? What areas of the world already "turn them on?" What locations are already hot, and are there any unreached peoples near by? Examine all the facets of the equation to diagnose what your people will gravitate toward. This may be God's way of leading us to a people group and place He wants His people to invest in.

2. Second, we did the research necessary, on targets that fit our O.Q. One of the areas God had placed on our

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hearts for years was Central Europe. The former communist countries are on our hearts, due to several missions trips to Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia and Russia that were taken well before the Iron Curtain fell. Our mission committee did their homework on several nations, then we scheduled a meeting with Dr. Peter Kuzmic. He enabled us to see the needs clearly in that area of the world. We then assigned various unreached people groups to various committee members to list the pros and cons for each, with a view to adopt one of them.

3. Next step was to decide on a people group to target, and then to adopt them. After much prayer and study, we decided to adopt a people in Croatia. This has meant that while we will not stop our work with the 38 other missionary units on our support roster, we will direct our prayer, people focus, money focus and resource focus on the Croatian people. This has been the most significant decision we have made since I became the mission pastor at Skyline.

4. Our next step was to discern who would make the best national contact, and to build a friendship with them. Dr. Kuzmic was able to recommend names for every area we had studied. Obviously, he was excited over our decision to adopt Croatia, since his seminary is located in that country. He suggested we contact a young pastor, Danijel Mrcic, who had pastored with him in Osijek, and now wanted to plant a church in Split, Croatia, which is the second largest city in the country. Split had no evangelical churches at all at that time. We made our initial contact by

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phone, and then by letter. I introduced myself and our church, and explained our intentions. Danijel was immediately encouraged, and said: "Even if all you do is pray for us, we will be helped by you." We discovered Danijel and his wife, Eva, were living off of the gifts and money from their wedding a year earlier. They had very little left, no building and no people to help. The time was ripe for us to join them.

5. For a fifth step, we went on a research trip to study the situation and location. Another pastor joined me, with a video camera and lots of paper to write on. We met Danijel at the bus station in Zagreb, then flew down to the Split airport that exhibited signs of bullet holes and bomb shells in several places. Our research with Danijel covered a study of the people and their history. We would also agree on a strategy; the geographic location and our partnership possibilities. This was valuable time that gave us both confirmation and direction for our future plans and involvement.

7. Our next step was to develop a plan to give our church leaders ownership of the vision. We knew we needed to impart vision to those in influence at Skyline: To the pastoral staff, teachers, home group leaders and lay leaders in the church. Video footage has been priceless to accomplish this objective and purpose. In addition, we put together laminated prayer cards, bookmarks, T-shirts and a mission handbook, entitled: "Holding the Rope." The phrase is borrowed from William Carey, who told his supporters in England: "I will go down to India...if you will hold the rope." Implication was to hold on to him through prayer, encouragement and finances.

8. Next was imparting the vision to the people with quality, priority and excellence. As part of an ongoing strategy, we show a Croatia Update video three times a year. On a quarterly basis, we publish prayer cards with the

Croatian flag on one side and news and prayer requests on the other. We have people who have gone to Croatia or prayed regularly for Croatia give testimonies on how "holding the rope" has impacted their lives. We also put a Missions Update in our worship bulletin each month to keep the Croatia people fresh in the minds and hearts of the church. This has cost money and effort—but it has all been well worth it.

9. The next, step was to give the congregation a variety of opportunities to invest. Basically, our three fundamental opportunities were/are:

- a. Intercession to pray regularly for the people of Croatia.
- b. Involvement to go on a mission trip to serve in Croatia.
- c. Investment to give financially through Faith Promise giving.

In 1992, we also began I.M.P.A.C.T (Institute for Missionary Preparation and Cross-Cultural Training). This is a one year school to intensively train disciplers for cross-cultural ministry. Our first missionary family has been trained, Kent and Cheri Pickslay, who now serve with Danijel and Eva in Croatia. The partnership is growing.

10. Finally, we try to maintain consistent communication regarding our adopted people group with our congregation. At this point, we must see it clearly, say it creatively, and show it constantly. We tell stories, that will reignite the fire to pray for the adopted people. We've shared about the eleven baptism candidates at the first baptism service in Split; and the newspaper article on our ministry there that actually communicated the Gospel to its readers! We share answers to prayer. Our people pray for growth and for a building for the church to meet in. I was privileged to announce last year that they found a building, and now about 50-60 attend the services. The idea is to be creative with this communication and to use tools to help the people remember

what has been communicated..

At this point, Skyline is enjoying a beautiful partnership with a national church planter in Croatia. We're literally seeing tons of refugee goods get to needy people in Split; we have sent three short-teams over (23 people) and have two additional teams going this past summer. We have a missionary family working with Danijel and Eva on a long term basis. Forty percent of our \$275,000 Faith Promise budget goes to Croatia and we have about 1,100 prayer partners praying regularly for Croatia to be reached with the Gospel.

The following is an excerpt from our story that we published for our congregation, that simply tells how and why we chose to adopt Croatia as a people group.

Adopting a People Group

According to Scripture, God has broken down or divided the human race into "nations" or "people groups" so that they can more easily be reached. We read,

And God has made, from one man, every tribe and nation of men. He did this in order that they might seek for Him, and find Him as a nation, although He is not far from any of us. (Acts 17:26-27)

Strategists in world evangelism are challenging churches to "adopt unreached people groups" and see to it that they are reached through establishing the church within that group. This means assuming responsibility to begin targeting them for prayer, money and time into the needs of that ethnic group.

After much prayer, research and travelling, we have decided to penetrate Eastern Europe. These former communist, atheistic nations are now open to the Gospel, since the breakdown of the Iron Curtain in 1989. Truly, the Eastern Bloc nations and peoples are ripe for the harvest.

But why the Eastern Bloc countries and nations? Here are some of our answers:

It's a Hot Button Today

Former Communist countries such as the U.S.S.R., Roumania, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia have been in the news, particularly for the last few years. Revolution and reform have raised our awareness both of the deep needs as well as the ministry opportunities.

It's a Needy Area of the World

The evangelical church is virtually nonexistent in many areas, and among various people groups in Eastern Europe. The need is great to establish permanent, disciple-making churches, where many have never heard the Gospel in an understandable way.

It's a Hungry Area of the World

The Spirit of God seems to be moving in magnificent and dynamic ways in the "new" Eastern European nations. People have shown significant hunger for the Gospel and are willing to pay the price to travel long distances and expend time and energy just to hear the Scriptures.

The Door is Open Now

We don't know how long this opportunity for spiritual and religious freedom will be available. Turmoil and instability seem to indicate that we need to do something soon, before political regimes make access difficult or impossible.

After discussions with Dr. Peter Kuzmic, an Eastern European leader and President of the Evangelical Theological Seminary, we have decided to specifically target Croatia. Let's take a brief look at this people and region.

The People of Croatia

Croatia formerly was a republic of Yugoslavia, but independence was declared in June of 1991. Soon afterwards, Yugoslavian military forces invaded Croatia and Europe's first war was

raging in nearly 50 years.

After months of fighting nearly one million Croats became homeless and as many as 30,000 died or were missing. Especially hard hit have been Croatia schools, hospitals and churches. The violence has been indiscriminate and civilians have suffered most of the casualties.

Croatia and its people are needy for several reasons, including the ongoing war, the one million refugees

teaching for decades, and have had little hope of hearing the Gospel from anyone, much less from someone within their own ethnic language group.

Croatia is an unreached area. A multiplying viable Christian church has not been established. It is accessible; located off the Adriatic coast with major port cities. Our national contact is ready to plant a church. He has good people skills. It will provide a good field experience for short-term workers. It

is in desperate need both physically and spiritually because of the war.

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in need of basic food and medicine, the pains of unemployment (which has reached 70% nationwide), and a vacuum of evangelical witness and churches to share the hope that Jesus Christ can give.

Croatia is predominately Catholic in its background, so there are church buildings in and around the countryside. But that didn't deceive us! It was a nominal Catholic situation at best; few really know the Lord, and even religious traditions were and are dying.

The region is considered "unreached" according to *Operation World*. The percentage of evangelical Christians in Croatia is 0.05%. (We have more Christians in our church than they have in their entire country!) Dr. Peter Kuzmic believes it to be one of the neediest and "hungriest" areas in Europe for the Gospel. They have been under the influence of atheistic

suffering for the one million refugees and war victims, doing it all in the name of Jesus our Lord! Helping them with food, clothes, medicine and housing is the most tangible way to love them right now, and will allow us to earn our right to communicate the Gospel to them.

Finally, a third step is to actually go to them and partner with a Croatian national Christian who plans to start a new church in Croatia. This partnership will not just be a project but a relationship where we send teams of workers to minister, encourage, build and share.

A Partnership Begins

The Croatian pastor who we will be partnering with is Danijel Mrcic. He graduated from E.T.S., Dr. Kuzmic's Seminary, and felt that God was calling him to the coastal city of Split. Danijel and his wife, Eva, are an excellent team. Danijel, a man of faith and discernment, is passionate about reaching

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people in their need, and communicating hope to them through relief service and the Gospel. Eva, is a daughter of missionaries in Spain and portrays ser-vanthood and discipleship. Together, they express a powerful mixture of talents and spiritual gifts. It will be exciting to partner with them as they endeavor to plant a church in Split.

Split is a beautiful city on the Adriatic seacoast, to which many of the war refugees are migrating. It is the second largest city in the nation, and the largest in the region of Dalmatia. Interestingly, this is the exact place where the apostle Paul preached, and sent Titus to establish a church, about 2,000 years ago. It is the very place mentioned in the book of Romans and II Timothy. However, it is just as "unreached" today as it was back then. This is another vivid reminder that Christians of every generation must reach

their own generation with the Gospel!

Split is a large city populated by some 300,000 to 500,000 people. Virtual-ly none are evangelical Christians. No evangelical church exists there at all. As of June 1992, over 50,000 refugees had fled to this place, many with no homes nor families. The number of refugees grows daily.

Conclusion

We believe that Skyline Wesleyan Church will make a significant impact on Croatia through starting "daughter" churches, using national leaders, partnering with them through our prayers, finances and short-term missionaries trained to assist in pioneer church planting efforts.

We remind ourselves that this is not just a project—it's a relationship we are developing. We're going to take on the Croatia people— and see to it that

they find the love of God by faith in Christ Jesus through the Word of God

I have not written this to be an interesting piece of information. Rather it is designed to be a challenge to all Christians and churches to make a difference to reach the unreached peoples and areas of the world with the good news of redemption in Christ Jesus our Lord. My prayer is that others may follow suit and take up the challenge of adopting an unreached people who still haven't heard the Good News and plant the Church of Christ in their midst. So may it be for God's glory!

Timothy Elmore is the former mission pastor at Skyline Wesleyan Church located in Lemon Grove, CA.