OUR LIFE ADVENTURE



MLADEN AND DRAGICA JOVANOVIĆ

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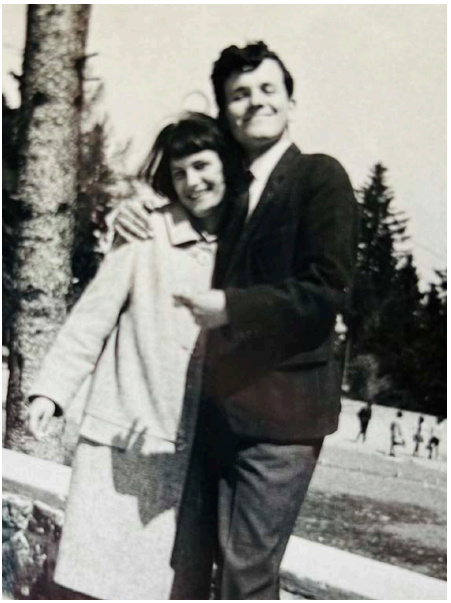
Some parts of this book may be unfamiliar to younger readers, because I am not just talking about the last century, but the last millennium. The story starts in the '60s: the time of Yugoslavia, communist regimes, limitations of freedom, and actions that would be unimaginable today.

You may think I am going into too much detail, but it is through those details that God's plan for our life came to fruition. Neither Mladen nor I ever thought we would end up working in a Church. In fact, if God was even on our list of interests, He was at the bottom. When I look back, I can see God's plan and His guidance, even when we weren't aware of Him, and even when we were resisting Him. Mladen and I met in 1962 in high school. By chance, we both enrolled in the same school. I was a freshman, and he was a junior. We were fifteen and seventeen and a half years old, only children.

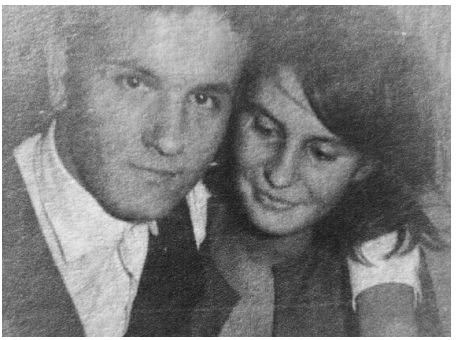


Mladen and Dragica with their classmates in high school

Little by little, we were getting to know each other, and we enjoyed being together. We were together every break between classes, so much that even our teachers teased us for acting like a "married couple".



Even before enrolling in high school, Mladen had learned Esperanto, the international language which was very popular at the time. It wasn't long before he included me in the Esperanto club, and introduced me to many kind people, some of whom I'm still friends with today. At only seventeen years old, he led and taught the club's Esperanto course. The oldest student in the course was sixty three years old, and everyone else was still well older than Mladen. Thanks to Esperanto, we were able to travel to Austria, Italy, Hungary, Bulgaria, and all over Yugoslavia. That may not seem like a big achievement today, but in the 60s, you couldn't even get a personal passport, so it was quite a feat. Mladen had somehow gotten his hands on a joint passport "under full material and criminal responsibility". He was blissfully ignorant of how badly it would have complicated



Dragica's 17th birthday



his life if someone from the group decided to stay abroad. After graduating technical school, it was logical for him to continue his studies in that subject. He enrolled in Technical Education and Physics at Pedagogical Academy. It didn't last long, only one semester, but that was enough for him to get a teaching position in technical education at a school in Dubrava. Every penny from that job was used for a two-month trip in Europe, where he gained expanded horizons and new interests. Indology was his next step, but



Mladen and Dragica with the Esperantos

once again he found no success. After that, he enrolled in a Russian language course, but couldn't receive a visa to visit Russia, but the best way to learn a language is to live in a country where it's spoken. Instead, he traveled to Poland for a semester to learn Polish. After so much wandering and so many changes, he enrolled in Polonistics, Phonetics, and Linguistics at the university of Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. I was waiting for him to say he'd had enough, however, this is where he found himself. Thanks to his technical knowledge, he became an assistant - a phonetic practices demonstrator - because he was able to handle all of the necessary equipment. He became a teacher once again. Teaching was something he had a talent and a passion for. At the same time, he had to continue studying languages, so by the end of his studies, he was perfecting how to speak eight languages.

When I finished my studies at the teachers' academy, I got a job at a school, and as soon as we had a stable income, we got married. At first, we lived with my parents in a 129 sq.ft. room. We were happy, and from the beginning we wanted to prove that we were "adults". In that little room, we had everything: kitchen, dining room, living room, and bedroom. We shared one bathroom with my parents. It was very cute!



Mladen and Dragica's wedding in Zagreb, January 11, 1969



As a graduate student, only one step from getting his diploma, Mladen received a job offer at the university of Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences to be a professor, and teach the Croatian-Serbian language course for foreigners.

As a Non-Aligned nation, Yugoslavia had a good relationship with many third-world countries, and provided almost free education for those students, but to receive the education, they had to first learn Croatian. With the new audio-visual method, this was possible to complete within a year. Today, in many African and Middle Eastern countries, there are people who learned Croatian from Mladen and were able to complete their education.





Mladen with foreign students at the university of Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

In his second year teaching, two married American couples joined the group. Officially, they were "exchange students", as they would never receive a visa as missionaries. They quickly became friends with Mladen, and little by little, they told him their true plan to create a Church in Zagreb. It's hard to imagine Mladen's shock and disbelief when he heard they believed in God. We were taught that faith was "opium for the masses", and that God was a "crutch" for the incompetent and unsuccessful. Only grannies and imbeciles believed in God. Primitive people, in other words. Mladen took it upon himself to free these four "poor" people from their delusions about God, Church, and eternal life. "You are educated people coming from the advanced country of America, how can you be so primitive as to believe in those myths and legends?"

God gave Bud and David wisdom, so they told Mladen: "We see you are familiar with books. Here, have a Bible. Read it, and if you manage to prove through the Bible that God does not exist, we are ready to question our beliefs and faith." What a beautiful testimony: certainty in the strength of God's Word,

and confidence in their Lord. Can you guess what happened next?

Mladen read studiously, writing down all of his questions and uncertainties, followed by endless conversations, interpretations, and outsmarting. I was jealous that he was spending more time studying the Bible than with me. I had suspicions. First, who were they? Were they some of those fanatics we had heard about? Second, I wondered subconsciously how long this phase would last.

When they invited us to their house, we felt an unfamiliar peace. Their relationship with each other and with their children was so kind, careful, and courteous. When we sat at the table, our hands clasped tight and they said a prayer of thanks, it was something we'd never experienced before. I didn't understand what was happening, but that feeling of gratitude and love made me think: "That's it! That's what I want in my life!"

We started spending more time with them. Some new people joined. We regularly got together at whoever's place had the most space. It was the seed of a community!

And then, a shock! As a graduated polonist [specialist in the Polish language or Polish literature and culture - ed.] Mladen was sent to Poland to be an instructor at Warsaw University. Bud was disappointed. After putting in so much time and energy, he was leaving. It's a familiar feeling, isn't it?

I stayed in Zagreb with a three year old Saša, because his mandate was supposed to last "only" two years.



Bud Pickle teaching from the Bible, Mladen translating



David and Sandy Gatewood



Dragica with little three year old Saša in Zagreb during Mladen's stay in Poland

Bud and Mladen stayed in contact. Not by text messages, not by video calls; even a telephone call was an expensive luxury. They stayed in touch through regular mail. They weren't just letters, they were books of questions, answers, plans, and possibilities!

Mladen worked a small number of hours at the university, so he would spend a lot of time with the Bible. He'd come home every two or three months. During one such visit, he said he wanted to get baptized. Bud nearly passed out.

Of course that was Mladen's next step. There was no baptistry or church building, so someone's large bathtub did the trick. It was a moment of humility for Mladen. At the time, I wasn't even aware of what was happening, and to some extent, Mladen also wasn't aware of the significance or weight of that decision.



Mladen's baptism at Aunt Ljerka's in a bathtub

At the time, I had very little trust in my husband or the idea of God. It was all strange to me.

During our time in Zagreb, one Sunday sermon held on a field trip to Trakošćan was groundbreaking for me.

While bread and wine was being passed from person to person during communion, they skipped me because I wasn't baptized.

In that moment, I fell apart. I realized in that moment that my husband had a different level of intimacy with God that I didn't have, nor did I have it with him. Mladen never tried to influence my relationship with God, nor did he try to influence me to be baptized.



Sunday worship on field trip to Trakošćan [A historic castle in Croatia - ed.], 1972

Only then did I start to seriously think about my own relationship with God. Only then did the two of us start talking and studying the Bible together.

After a period of intense study, I decided to give my life to God and get baptized. That was during my second pregnancy.

Since that was when I accepted Christ, we decided to name our second son Kristijan (we even considered naming the baby Ana Marija, because we were hoping for a girl).

The two-year-long tenure in Poland had ended, but the university insisted that Mladen stay for two more years, and they did this five times! He was the only instructor that stayed for five mandates. He was successful in his job, appreciated among his colleagues, and the favorite among his students.

When we realized we didn't want to spend our lives apart, I quit my secure job, and we all moved to Poland in the fall.



Mladen with students in Poland

During that ten-year period, Mladen had to go back to serve his time in the military. Mladen, a pacifist, lover of books and spirituality, had to hold a gun and take orders from an eighteen-year-old superior officer.

This was a good way to practice humility. It was obvious that this young superior hated school, because he took out all of his frustrations on Mladen. "Teach, the toilets need to be scrubbed. Teach, you didn't clear the track well enough, there's leaves on it again (it was fall). Teach, the bed was made wrong." This went on indefinitely. Mladen was 29 years old then. It definitely wasn't easy, but maybe his maturity and knowledge of God is what he needed to not break. That was what it was like for the first three months in Sarajevo [The capital of Bosnia - ed.]. When he was transferred to Banja Luka [City in Bosnia - ed.], they recognized his interest in books and assigned him to work in the library. The first thing he did was argue [with his superiors] that books should be sorted by topics, rather than size and color. He made the job seem so important that they gladly gave it to him. So until the end of his service, he "worked" in the library. There you go, he knew how to keep his head down when it was necessary.

When he was getting ready to leave for the military, Mladen knew he could not, under any circumstances, bring the Bible with him, but he couldn't fathom a year without the Word of God. He took a risk. He removed the cover from the New Testament and bound it in the cover from a copy of "Philosophies of Marx and Engels". When they saw the book during a search, they would simply let it be. That was how he was able to read God's word every day in "enemy" territory.





Mladen serving in the military in Sarajevo and Banja Luka

After completing his service, Mladen returned to Poland and continued his teaching mandate. Bud wanted to evangelize through radio programs. It was impossible to even imagine a program about Christian topics in Yugoslavia on TVs or radio. I just want to describe how remarkable it is that our ideas can come true through God. Bud had an idea. He sent scripts to Mladen, who translated and adapted them for radio programs, but then they realized that they didn't know anyone who could use recording equipment and was also a good speaker. They didn't even have a studio, but they knew a Ukrainian brother in Christ who lived in Switzerland and was doing the same thing for Ukraine. They made an appointment at Radio Monte Carlo. They traveled to Switzerland every 2-3 months to record 10-12 programs. It turned out that they had a great translator, videographer, and speaker in Mladen. Once a week, when those Christian programs were broadcast, people would gather around the radio receiver and excitedly await the broadcast. Today, that's unimaginable! During his time in Warsaw, Mladen was working with a church that would half-secretly meet in one house. He was creating good bonds with the young adults in that community, and would actively meet with them, most often in our apartment or somewhere out in nature. Poland had an even crueler regime, and police would often investigate what they were doing. Mladen would often joke that he was the only Church of Christ missionary being paid by a communist regime.



Mladen's father Lovro and Dragica with little Saša waiting for the radio broadcast



Mladen in the radio studio in Switzerland



Mladen and young adults from church from Warsaw in nature



Young adults at Mladen and Dragica's apartment in Warsaw



Mladen during communion in church in Warsaw

For 10 years, we split our time between Zagreb and Warsaw. We spent our summers in Zagreb, and during the school year we were in Poland. We called it "our Polish Adventure". This is when we matured and grew up too, and worked and lived. This is where our second son Kristijan was born, while Saša was excelling in school as if he were a native Pole. We created a great community of close friends, and while we were limited to purchasing basic groceries and necessities, we considered Poland our second home. During this time, our hair wasn't yet gray.





Mladen and Dragica while their hair wasn't gray

Bud and David already had a stable group of people that would consistently meet to study the Bible. We would join them when we visited Zagreb. When we were getting ready for our permanent return from Poland, we encountered a big dilemma: what next?

A Polish language professor at the University of Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences said that he had a polonist position available for Mladen, as he had decided to get involved in politics. We knew there was no chance for Mladen to work at a university with a Christian focus. However, one of the conditions for the job was to join the Communist Alliance. Mladen and that professor had a father-son relationship. They had a difficult and tedious conversation, but in the end he shook Mladen's hand and said "I'm sorry. I am disappointed, but I respect your commitment and passion. All the best!" Mladen felt guilty for a very long time because of this. It was as if he had betrayed a good man, and disappointed him. When we returned to Zagreb, we were offered two options: being an instructor in India or China. Both were very appealing offers! That was the time when we finally had to decide which direction our life should take: a secure career, or uncertain work for the Church. At the same time, a few people in America were preparing a theological program for Mladen's needs. God pulled us from all those dilemmas: we went to America. The theological studies were difficult and demanding, but very useful. To have superb professors, to experience faith and work and a community connected through God's love, it was all new for us! We'd never seen anything like that before. We realized that the Christian life is real. The care, love, and warmth that people surrounded us with seemed unreal to me. It was my first time in America, and I didn't know a lot of English. During the day, Saša and Kristijan would be in school, and Mladen would be at the university, but I was never alone. One of the women was always with me. We arrived to an empty house, but by the end of the day, we had absolutely everything from silverware to even two TVs.

This one time, I wanted to make some traditional Croatian food: Walnut roll and poppy seed roll, of course. I had walnuts and all the other ingredients, but I could not find poppy seeds anywhere. I asked, and one sister in Christ told me "Oh, no problem. I have some at home." She brought me two small packs the size of Croatian baking powder packs. When I told her I needed at least half a kilogram, she looked at me as if I was crazy, and said: "For that amount we'd end up in jail!" In America, poppy seeds were not as easy to get because they contain opium. It was interesting to discover all the cultural differences!

As we were becoming more delighted about Christianity, the community around us also grew more delighted with Mladen. The way he learned and understood things quickly, the way he put his newfound knowledge into a biblical context, and also his general knowledge would encourage them all to try harder. They didn't hold back with each other, nor with him. When we returned from America in 1980, we still didn't know what to do. Mladen worked as a freelance translator for two years, and did whatever Bud needed at the same time. Then he received an offer to fully devote his time to the Church. Many of you know or have heard about all the little steps in how the Church of Christ in Zagreb came to be. From meetings in picnic areas and houses, to buying the very first space in Amruševa, and then the building in Kušlanova. There were ups and downs, joys and disappointments, but giving up was never an option. From 1982 onward the church was like a second home for us. There were many needs, and little experience, but also great desire. We were aware of how much God had changed our lives, and we wanted others to have the same experience. Beyond the constant Sunday morning services, people were coming to the church daily with their many needs and questions, because not everyone was familiar with faith.



Dragica with the women's group in America



Dragica with Saša and Kristijan in front of their house in America



The Jovanović family in front of the church in Amruševa



Children in the church



Children at the Jovanović family's home

We realized very quickly that children could not calmly sit and follow along with two hours of adult discussion, so we separated them into their own group, with a program adjusted for their age. We were training teachers on the fly. As an American, Ruth Tešić knew how everything worked; Marta Bulek had some experience from her childhood in a baptist church; and I used to be a teacher, so we managed.

We had no teaching materials, so we had to make and prepare everything ourselves. Later, we received some material from a Church in America. This was easier, but there was still a lot of translation, adjustments, and duplicating. There was no photocopying, but there was tracing paper and cheap paper! I am not complaining, because I learned a lot preparing this myself.

Besides the Bible, we had no other Christian literature or materials in Croatian. The listeners of the radio programs would send letters, so that was how Mladen started a Bible correspondence course. This was yet another thing that needed materials prepared and translated. We realized that some advice in the translated literature was too Americanized, so Mladen began writing down and systematizing Bible studies. This was how the idea of a Bible school was born, and so the first Christian books written in Croatia were born, the first books that were "ours". When he started to work with students, he also began writing notes for them. That's how Mladen's first books came to be, but he still translated foreign literature.



Mladen responding to letters from the Christian radio program listeners



Christian literature, translations, editing, and Mladen's books

The peak of the yearly events were the summer camps. We didn't have a space for them, so we stayed as a group at a public campground in Banjole by the city of Pula. We had many kinds of tents, one large gas stove, a few pots and pans, and plastic plates. Not the one time use kind either, these we had to wash after each use. We did everything from grocery shopping to cooking, to cleaning. We did it all by ourselves. All of this was done through music too! No one ever complained! At the beginning, there were about twenty to thirty people, mainly contacts from Zagreb.





As our relationships with American universities grew, we got more and more students. This was a part of their studies, like an internship. They had angelic singing voices, and that was what attracted many people from camp. Every night they had a free concert!

Years passed, and we had slightly better conditions with every passing year. We even reached the point where we finally had benches to sit on and tables for preparing and distributing food. We stopped being "dusters", as we called ourselves since we did everything on dusty ground. This went on for thirty three years. We started with thirty-ish people, then grew to one hundred to one hundred and twenty people. We didn't have the capacity for more than that, and then the company that owned the public campground sold it to a man who didn't care for us because we didn't eat or drink in his restaurant. We are grateful to God for enabling us to continue our meetings at camp Činta, on Ugljan island. Everything was much better there, to an incomparable degree, but we lost a lot of our intimacy and reliance on each other. This was challenging, because it definitely took help and cooperation to make sure that a large pot of spaghetti didn't slide out into the bushes while draining it!





Dishwashing at camp, from the ground to tables: progress!



Baptisms at camp were special events





From dusters to sitting on benches

Our time at camp was perfect for getting to know each other and growing closer every day. We wanted to continue living the same way. Regular church activities weren't enough. When the weather was nice, we would often spend our afternoons after worship at our home or someone else's, or we would go on a short field trip. We were inspired by our desire to spend more time together to have Sunday lunches at church, family dinners, celebrations, birthdays, graduations, etc. More togetherness in church brought many blessings.





Church community at Mladen and Dragica's home

There were six or seven couples with children on the threshold of teenagerhood, which was a challenge for everyone. While we were discussing how to be the best parents we could, we concluded that as married couples, we need support, advice, fellowship, and sometimes even practical help. With prayer and interpretation of God's word, we realized how little we knew about communication and resolving conflicts without yelling, crudeness, and arguments. We saw how important it was to make efforts toward love, respect, politeness, and closeness.

During these meetings, we talked about how to express our feelings, how to recognize and respect others' feelings, and how to give without just expecting to receive. At the time, we had no materials about relationships, communication, or expressing our feelings. Even the nicest and strongest flower will wilt if it isn't taken care of.

When Mladen went to his high school's twenty year reunion, he came home very sad. "Not a single man in that group had anything nice to say about his wife!"

Those were the people we were surrounded with, and we didn't have good examples of healthy and happy marriages. This is why we were all immensely blessed by our successful and long-lasting group and the married couples who often visited.

At camp, we met a married couple from Houston, who stood out from the others because of how they treated each other: with respect, love, caring, gentleness, and kindness. They always spoke to each other with eye contact and held hands. They were Esther and K. Speck.

Mladen and I always said "It's beautiful to see how older couples love each other so much!" They were in their fifties, and we were in our thirties, of course they were "old" to us. Today, I see that as young.

We became friends with them, and spent a lot of time together in America, and every year they would come visit us. We considered them our spiritual parents. We looked up to them in everything. We realized how wrong it was to think love was only for the young and that you don't need to work for it.

With the Lord's help, we continued to guard and build our love, our relationship, and our respect for each other. I hope someone was watching us, and realized they could be better than what they saw around them. I don't think this was some big virtue of ours.

We simply trusted fully in God, and he saw the potential in us to be better. Thank you, God!



Mladen and Dragica with K. and Esther Speck

The Church faced a big challenge in the 90s. The war had started: sirens, blackouts, exiles and refugees on every corner. We wanted to help, but how? With the help of the American churches Mladen had visited and told about Croatia's situation over the years, a wave of human and Christian solidarity spread. To comply with the law, the Church registered a humanitarian organization called "Peace on Earth", which was active for a good five years. In the U.S., this organization was known as "Croatia for Christ", and later shifted to providing permanent support for church work in Croatia. To secure long-term assistance, Mladen frequently traveled to America. He collected donations and spread the world of the situation in Croatia.



Mladen in America collecting donations for Croatia



Steve and Rajka were a part of this organization

The Church was a place where many unhappy people went for more than just a package of food, but also for comfort, kind words, and a place where they could tell their story and share their pain. They received this from everyone who worked there, in addition to a copy of the New Testament. Some of these people found God, and stayed in Church.

When Croatia got its independence, many new possibilities opened up. Radio shows were able to be recorded and broadcast in our own stations. The religious education we had in Church was introduced into schools as an official class. There were many new people in the church, so there was a need for more systematic Bible studies. Later, this became Bible school. There were many activities happening simultaneously, but also on the go.

Mladen developed a deep friendship with a man named Sead, who was blind from birth. He was extremely smart and educated. He played piano and sang beautifully, especially sevdalinka [Traditional Bosnian music - ed.]. As a blind person, he wanted to have a Bible in Braille. He and Mladen embarked on that extensive undertaking together, and so the first Bible for the blind was printed in Croatian. It takes up six feet on a shelf!

Creating the songbook we still use today was a long and demanding process, and so was translating the New Testament to contemporary Croatian. Obiteljski list [Family Church Magazine], which is still being published to this day and always becoming better, started as a bulletin board before being made into a magazine. As other Churches became visible and active, the Protestantsko Evanđeosko Vijeće [Croatian Evangelical Alliance - ed.] (PEV) was formed, and Mladen served as the Secretary for many years. Thanks to the PEV, all Churches of reformation heritage signed a contract with the Republic of Croatia to have full recognition and equality with the largest Church in the country. Mladen was the Co-Founder and Superior of the Council of the Churches of Christ for two mandates. He was an active member of the Religious Liberty Association for many years, and was elected President of the association a few months before his death. He often had the chance to speak on public television about the Churches of reformation heritage, as well as the Bible, morale, and theological subjects. He was included in many ecumenical events in Croatia. He was a speaker at many Christian gatherings, including many summer camps and spiritual events. He often worked with the Eastern European Missions (EEM) in Vienna. They were a mission which printed Bibles and Christian books in the languages of eastern Europe, during a time when faith was forbidden in those countries. There were many ways those books reached the people who needed them, and who proceeded to treat them as their greatest treasure. When the first trucks of Russian Bibles were traveling to Moscow, Mladen went with them. They gave away the Bibles for three days, and gathered thousands of addresses for the next shipment, all under the watchful eyes of the police.



Distributing numbers to collect Bibles in Moscow

There are too many activities to list them all, and I'm not even mentioning the ones in between. Mladen's frequent travels were difficult for the whole family. I am not complaining, as we've gained a lot from it; we met wonderful people and made lifelong friendships; our children learned multiple languages, traveled, expanded their horizons, and received an education; but sometimes I found it difficult because they were deprived of some "normal" activities with friends and family. One time, after traveling through America and half of Europe, we asked our son Kristijan what else he would like to see, and he sighed heavily and said: "I would really like to go to Sljeme [A popular Croatian skiing mountain - ed.]." Because we've never gone there together.

One time before a longer trip, Mladen told Saša: "You are now the man of the house, and are responsible for taking care of you mom, brother and sister." Saša took this very seriously. At the time, the Church youth group was getting ready for a weekend field trip. I told Saša to go, and that I could handle Kristijan and Andrea by myself, but he was hesitant. He was torn between wanting to go with the group, and the feeling of duty to his dad. The boys came to get him, but he told them that he couldn't go after all. When they left, the waterfalls came. I've never seen him cry like that, and he was only 15.

Our kids did not have normal friendships either. Another story might need to be told here about a rumor that traveled through our village. Since we were close friends with the Johnson family, we often joked about how our surnames were actually the same: Johnson in English, and Jovanović in Croatian, so Andrea (our youngest daughter) shared the story about how in America our last name was Johnson. Then a rumor began to spread around that we were American spies. Let us remember that this wasn't something to joke about in the 80s. So when the war started, things weren't going too well for us with our last name, and the fact that Andrea didn't go to Catholic religious education didn't help.

Still, our children had something special, and that was that they had a family in every family that was a part of the church, and not just in Croatia. At the beginning of the war, the Johnsons, Mladen, and I signed an agreement that stated if anything happened to us, they would become the legal guardians of our children. Thank God that wasn't necessary, but I am certain they would have done it. Besides, they were a "home away from home" to Kristijan and Saša while they attended college in America. That relationship was through the blood of Christ. Rick Johnson always says: "We are not just friends, we are family!"

After our children had grown up, Mladen and I often traveled to America. When he received an award recognizing his 20 years of service, they praised him to no end (you know how it goes). Then it was his turn to speak. He thanked everyone, and then said none of this would be possible without one person. I thought to myself, was it Bud, David, Ken? Who was he talking about? After a pause, he said: "None of this would have been possible, I wouldn't be the man I am today if I hadn't had the cornerstone I could lean on when I ran out of strength, the cornerstone that had my back." Now I knew he was going to say "Jesus Christ", but when he said "my Dragica," I was in shock. He often told me how much I meant to him, and how much he appreciated me, but to say it in front of hundreds of people, I couldn't believe it. He asked me to stand by his side on the stage, and the Church stood and began singing. I don't know how I survived.

I was honored, proud, happy, dazed, and humble at the same time.



Mladen with the Johnson family



Mladen and Dragica receiving the Christian Leadership Award for their 20 years of service

In America, Mladen had the reputation of a speaker Americans could learn something from. He spoke to everyone from house gatherings, churches, and church groups to rotary clubs, universities, and many events. During one donation event, he was even a speaker alongside George W. Bush Junior (later President of the USA).

He met and exchanged thoughts with many important people in America, and during all that he stayed humble and modest.

On two occasions, he taught at a Christian college in Oklahoma [Then OCC, now OC - ed.] for a semester. He taught for years at the International Christian University in Vienna. Every year, except for the war years, he was a mentor to many groups of American students. He received his master's degree at Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek [A city in Croatia - ed.], where he also taught for a few years. Many activities for one life. "I will rest in Heaven," he'd tell me when I'd tell him to slow down and rest. He would often spend all day working in the office. He liked talking to people who would ask him difficult questions. He wouldn't rest until he found the right answer, no matter how many books he'd have to read.

Still, his favorite thing to do was working with students, to pass on his knowledge to young adults and encourage them to love what they did, to think for themselves, and to respect themselves and others. The feeling of cooperation and satisfaction went both ways. He was a born teacher.



Mladen with college students in America

As the Church family grew, so did ours; they grew and grew up. Thank God for giving them health and knowledge, and letting them grow into good and fair people. They handle life as best as they can, but they know God is always near. When Tom and Sandra Sibley arrived in Croatia, they took a lot of work upon themselves. From the Bible school, they created the respectable Biblical Institute, where Mladen taught as well. Steve Taliferro also joined them as a versatile worker. He worked at the Institute, but also with the Church, the youth, and the children.



Mladen and Dragica's family through the years



Tom and Sandra Sibley in Croatia



Steve Taliaferro with Mladen and Dragica



Graduates of the Biblical Institute

Throughout his last ten years, Mladen traveled as a lecturer to summer camps in Albania. For him, it was an unbelievable experience. He saw how, in a land where every hundred meters there was a bunker and where religion was forbidden, hunger and thirst for God ruled, and how the Holy Spirit was lifting the new generation of Albanians.

Two young adults met at one of these camps. After five years, they decided to get married, but wanted Mladen to ordain the wedding. The wedding date was moved many times until their schedules lined up with Mladen's. They wanted to show their families, who were Muslim, who they were and what they received from their decision to follow Christ. It was an unforgettable experience. A few days later, we left for Zagreb, and they went on their honeymoon to Greece. When Mladen passed a week later, the couple ended their trip and attended the funeral with five other people from the Church. That's how much he meant to them, and how much they appreciated him. It's impossible to summarize everything Mladen did, everything

he was. The only thing on his heart was the uniqueness of Christians, and he never missed an opportunity to promote fellowship and love among Christians, not just in Croatia, but everywhere else as well.

He was a peacekeeper and bridge builder, even amongst the irreconcilable. His biggest qualities were gentleness, patience, and wisdom. There aren't many people God gifted such blessings to. Of course, he couldn't do it all alone. Tom Sibley was his older brother, mentor, and friend, without whom there would be no Biblical Institute. Drago and Jasna Rožić, and Vlado and Renata Pšenko were his versatile right hands, as well as Jadranka Bračić, who knew more about Mladen's work than I did. With the arrival of Tom Sibley came conditions to appoint Church elders. Zoran Đaković and Željko Medved were chosen as elders. To this day, Zoran, Marina, Željko, and Jasna are pillars of the community in the Kušlanova Church, but not just them. I could list many other married couples and individuals because they gave their all, in one way or another, and contributed to our growth as a community connected through Christ's love.

Mladen considered the elders a part of his family, but there was no brother or sister in Christ that he didn't respect, pray for, or think about how to help them grow, so that God's mercy could be seen through them.



The community of the Kušlanova Church in Zagreb

Mladen received many awards for his work. He was especially honored and grateful to receive the Christian Leadership Award from the Biblical Institute in 2011. Posthumously, he received the Dr. Branko Lovrec award from the Religious Freedom Association. I thank the Kušlanova Church of Christ for setting up a marble tablet at his grave with expressions, memories, and thanks on the ten-year anniversary of his death.



Recognition for Christian Leadership Award in the year 2011





Dragica accepting the award for Mladen's work from Dragutin Matak



Remembrance tablet from the Church of Christ in Zagreb on Mladen Jovanović's grave in Donji Zagon, Croatia

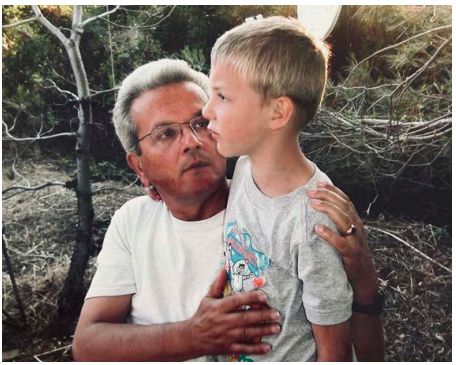
It's been ten years that Mladen has been in a better place, with the Lord, but still indescribably missed by me, family, friends, and the Church.

I don't ask why. God knows.

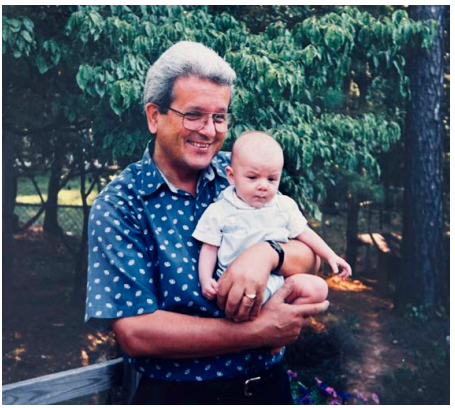
He was a good husband, a better father, and the best grandfather. We were the craziest grandparents when our grandson Filip was born. Mladen walked around the world with a shirt that said "I'm a super grandpa", and I had a bag with transparent pockets with many pictures of Filip.



Mladen wearing his "I'm a super grandpa" shirt



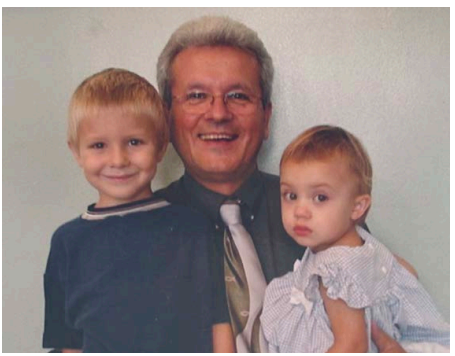
Mladen with his first grandson Filip



Four more grandchildren were born during Mladen's life: Saša's children, Filip and Maja, and Kristrijan's children, Jan, Nika, and Tesa.



Nika, Jan, and Tesa



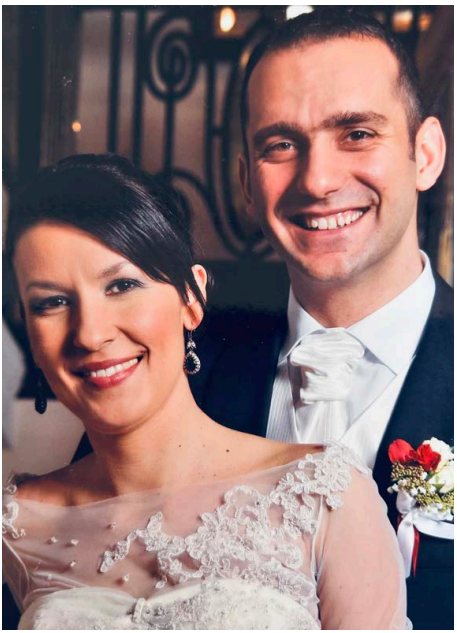
Mladen with Filip and Maja



The grandchildren: Maja and Tesa, Nika, Jan, and oldest grandson Filip

His greatest joy was when his only, and favorite, daughter Andrea married a good, Christian man. Davorin saw Mladen as a father, because he lost his own too early in his life. Unfortunately, this father wasn't in his life for long either.





Andrea and Davorin's wedding, January 5th, 2013

Mladen never met their three daughters, but they create their own image of Grandpa Mladen from our stories. Our three children, Saša, Kristijan, and Andrea, remember their dad with love and pride. They were lucky and blessed to have him as a father.



Mladen's granddaughters that he never met: Petra, Mirna, and Karla



Kristijan, Andrea and Saša

And I am grateful to God because I was able to spend my life full of adventures with a man like Mladen.

Dragica Jovanović, Mladen's Wife

APPENDIX

Here I want to share some of the letters Mladen and I received upon being given the Christian Leadership Award from the Biblical Institute, as well as a few articles and reviews that were published after his passing.

Letters delivered after receiving the Christian Leadership Award from the Biblical Institute:

KUŠLANOVA CHURCH OF CHRIST
Dear Mladen and Dragica,

Your spiritual family in Kušlanova would like to thank you with this letter for your committed service to the Lord. Since the very beginning of forming the Church of Christ in Croatia, you were the leader who was the example of how to live a Christian life full of love, understanding, and patience.

The period in which you founded the Church was not at all favorable due to the communistic-atheistic worldview in society, and the country's refusal to legalize religious communities. Despite that, you left behind respectable positions as a university professor and a schoolteacher to begin work as a preacher and religious teacher. On top of that, Mladen often traveled to teach classes and preach across America and Europe, and recorded radio shows to evangelize through radio, while Dragica took care of three children. It was all important to the growth of the little community of believers that would become the Church of Christ in Kušlanova and Amruševa, which spread mission work to Varaždin, Vukovar, and Slovenia. Those of us who are members of that community today know that this required a big sacrifice from both of you. That is exactly why we appreciate all of your efforts, because of which we receive blessings of living in our spiritual family today, in which we can find joy, comfort, warnings, and guidance. To simultaneously raise a family, serve in many different areas, and build people spiritually was not an easy task. Everyone who works with people knows that every individual is a world on their own. Everyone has their virtues and flaws, but because you were always open to talk and ready to learn from even the smallest ones, even your own weakness became something that gave glory to God, and something we can all learn from. You kept the members of the Church together, and created a community you rarely see, even in Churches. You've shown love and respect to everyone around you. You never forgot anyone, and everyone was valuable to you. Because of all this, you deserve our respect. You showed a great testimony of Christ's love and wisdom during the war, when the Church of Christ had a significant role in gathering humanitarian aid and offering shelter for many who were afraid. Many people were blessed in the midst of their troubles. You were faithful to the Lord, and showed His love to everyone, even in the most difficult times. You built relationships with other Churches and made many friendships. Your hearts were always big enough for every-

one. It was never too crowded for us in your life, as Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 6:12. We pray that we, as your spiritual children, have the same big hearts for you.

We are proud of you through Jesus Christ our Lord, and we are joyful with you. May God bring good to you who love Him, and who were invited through His decision to be equal to the image of His Son.

We love you, and thank God the Father for you,

Kušlanova Church of Christ

VARAŽDIN CHURCH OF CHRIST
Dear Mladen and Dragica,

We are immensely grateful to the Lord to have you. Thank you for all of your efforts in the Lord, for every word you directed toward us, for each extended hand in times of trouble, for your guidance, for your comfort, for the joy you gave us. We know you've gone through many difficult moments during your service, but we know the Lord comforted you and held you up. Your efforts in the Lord will never be taken for granted! Just remember how many souls were saved because of your testimonies of faith, how many marriages were saved, how many vows were renewed, how many churches and missions were founded, and one of those is the Church in Varaždin. You are our example and encouragement. May the Lord keep guiding you, watching over you, and blessing you, so you can keep being a blessing to us all in God's Glory!

In Christ,
Varaždin Church of Christ

CHURCH OF CHRIST - MISSION STATION VUKOVAR
It is with great joy that I am writing this commendation of brother Mladen. From the very beginning, Renata and I saw Mladen and Dragica as our spiritual parents, and we still see them as an example of Christian life. To me personally, Mladen is also an example as a preacher and a teacher of the Word of God.

A historical moment for me happened in the old year of 1991, a year after my baptism. At the time, I was working in the printing office "Spiritual Realities" in the Zagreb suburb of Klara. Mladen came to visit me during my shift and called me to be even more active in service of the Church of Christ. Alongside my repentance, this was an extremely important milestone in my life. Mladen's invitation to serve enabled me to make my dream come true: organizing Evenings of Christian Poetry. As a poet at heart, I lived for the poetry meetings, which built bridges amongst Christian communities. Through that, by serving the Church on a daily basis, I've received many blessings by meeting brothers and sisters, as well as friends of the community. I consider

opening up the church daily for people who just needed a rest for their souls or a cup of coffee to be one of Mladen's biggest accomplishments. A more modern historical moment happened five or six years ago. Brother Mladen came to me and said "it is time for you to become more active in the radio service." Until then, I had watched his mission work through the radio waves with wonder. He spread the Good News about Jesus Christ through more than ten radio stations. Letters arrived almost daily, and I considered it a beautiful blessing to be able to answer them, but Mladen offered me the opportunity to try writing and broadcasting my own messages. "Instead of my messages on the Velika Gorica radio," he said, "we'll broadcast your messages!" The radio in Velika Gorica was a new beginning for Renata and I. It was a service that was a source of encouragement for us in our new surroundings, where "Croatian Radio Vukovar" was broadcasting biblical messages into the ether every week. We can only say: "Thank you Mladen!" and "Lord, you and your ways are incredible!"

In conclusion, as Renata and I look at Mladen and Dragica's life, we clearly see Jesus' parable of the mustard seed coming true. "It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown, it is larger than all the garden plants, and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches," (Matthew 13:33). Through God's mercy and clarity, Renata and I share a joy where we, through Jesus' parable, found refuge on one of the branches of that big tree, which represents Mladen and Dragica's developmental path. The seed of faith in their hearts has born beautiful fruit.

Lord, thank you for the love you've shown us by making these dear people mean so much to us.

Vlado and Renata Pšenko

My dear Mladen!
How to begin this letter of thanks for your commitment and contribution to the betterment of students, friends, brothers, and sisters? How to describe someone who you see as your mentor, and often as a father who left too soon, in a few phrases, and make sure they're not hollow words of forced insincerity. How? I don't know how, but I do know that you are a role model for me, and that I'm so glad we've known each other for nearly thirty years. Yes, thirty! How time flies. I want you to know how I learned so much from you! Maybe you aren't fully aware of it, but I learn best by watching and studying your life and the example you set for us all. That isn't something you can learn in theological school. It's something you must live, and you live it. I've heard people so many times after they spent an afternoon with your family around Dragica's table of delicacies, saying that what you have cannot be real, but is just excellent acting, even hypocrisy. I always laugh in those situations and tell them: "No, my friends. What you've seen, that's it! It's not Hollywood, but the life of a Christian family where Christ is at the center. Every day, every week, every month, every year, all until death. That's it. Life with Christ and for Christ." That's what you must encourage and keep teaching us. I've gone through many church communities, heard countless sermons,

seen many issues and blessings. Still, through all of that, there was one consistent thing: the Church of Christ in Zagreb and the man at its helm. A man that leads by following Christ. That's what's unchangeable. That's what conquers. That's what attracts and brings back those who might get lost in the woods of colorful lies and lost wishes. That's the charisma the Lord has given you and nurtured from the day I first met you. Many people had testified about Christ in the church in Amruševa in the '80s in the last century. Not century, millennium! But your testimony, as well as the academic argument of Christ's existence, stayed with me until today. Mladen, God has directly used you to bring me, a sinner, to Him, and I will forever be grateful to you for that.

In the end, I would like to remind you that you were the catalyst that nudged me to finish what I started at vet school, and that it would be better to heal human hearts instead of cow's hearts. That was hard to accept in the moment, because I knew what a difficult job that would be, but with your undivided support, I managed to accomplish that too. I don't know if I've thanked you enough for that until now. And now at the end, you encourage me again to invest in myself and continue my education, which I will do with great joy, because I know that, besides my family, I have someone standing behind me who is equally close to me, and who wants only good for me.

May God bless you, man of God, and my honest prayer is for you to never falter, and to continue blessing all of us who are close to you and want to learn from you. May you live another 100 years!

Damir Kramarić

Dear Mladen and Dragica,
I write this in the name of myself, my loving Ljubica, and my daughters, but also in the name of the Christian communities I serve. Your life and character are an example of Christian love, approachability, and goodwill for all of us who had the opportunity to serve God and live our faith with you. Thank you for your beautiful parental care, fatherly and motherly support and love, because of which we haven't experienced anything that would hurt us or harm us all these years. We could always count on you, and felt safe with you.

Thank God, this letter is not an appropriate speech for a funeral, but we have many years ahead of us, in which we will enjoy the ripest fruits of experiences and God's goodness.

Thank you for everything!

We love you,

Jasmin Avdagić

THE FREE CHURCH OF CHRIST
THANKS AND RECOGNITION TO MLADEN JOVANOVIĆ ON THE OCCASION OF HIS LONG YEARS OF SERVICE

We started working with Mladen ten years ago. We've recognized a brother full of understanding and heartwarming spirit in him. On a few occasions, we spoke to him to get his opinion about situations we've been experiencing in the Church in Samobor. He gave us wise advice full of understanding. We recognized a brother in him, where we could come to him with trust about anything, knowing he would listen, encourage, and patiently share the truth about love with us. As the head of the Council of the Churches of Christ, it was our pleasure to see him enjoy listening to reports about every church community at the beginning of every month, as well as leading those meetings with special enjoyment. What especially brings us joy in Samobor is when we hear him on our local radio station, and the most important fact is that he is always with all of us. Thank you Mladen, for your humility and Christ-like simplicity in your service.

In the name of the Free Church of Christ in Samobor,

Nenad Jambrović

Dear Mladen and Dragica,
On this very special occasion, we wanted to communicate our thanksgiving to God for allowing us to serve with you in Croatia. We join with so many in Croatia and in the United States to affirm our deep respect for both of you as you have faithfully served Christ in your homeland and around the world. The Holy Scripture, which you so faithfully proclaim, teaches us to "give honor to whom honor is due." Because of your commitment to Christ, your eagerness to affirm the unity on all followers of Christ, your love for the church and your tireless efforts to advance the Kingdom of Christ we joyfully add our "AMEN" to your outstanding Christian Leadership. Many have observed your faithfulness and strong leadership. A significant number of individuals have benefitted from your teaching of Scripture and life principles and thus, have become leaders throughout Croatia and Central Europe. We have had the privilege of sharing life with you. We understand this to be a unique gift from God for which we are thankful. Often we have spoken of your faithfulness to the task which you willingly accepted as your calling from God. With your talents and abilities you could have received renown in many areas which the world esteems highly, but you chose to invest your lives in laboring for Jesus and His kingdom. Heaven applauds, your choice and this world is richer for it! We thank our Lord for the opportunity of serving with you, learning from you, and together with you, growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

With love and deep appreciation,

Tom i Sandra Sibley

Dear Mladen and Dragica,

I remember as a boy listening to you tell stories about your work and what God was doing through you in a far away place called Yugoslavia, and then Croatia. Your love for your country, your people, and for Jesus was so evident. It was part of my early awakening to what God was doing in other parts of the world, and (even though I didn't think I knew it at the time) to how he wanted me to be a part of it. I am privileged to now be working with you and to be a small part of what God is doing in this country. I thank God for you both and your many years of leadership and service to God and His people in Croatia, central Europe, and in the USA. There are many things I appreciate and respect in you: your love for the Lord, your commitment to the unity of His people and your leadership to that end, your professionalism and humility at the same time, your perseverance through a time of war, your commitment to family. As I was compiling the letters in this book, I was appreciative of the love and respect accorded you by so many, from so many different parts and periods of your life. I am honored to share this evening with you. I look forward to many more years in service to the Lord together in Croatia.

With deep love and admiration.

Blessings to you,

Steve Taliaferro

EEM
Dear Mladen,

On behalf of Eastern European Mission, I want to thank you for many years of faithful service and cooperation with our ministry.

Your contributions as a translator, book editor, author, and adviser are too numerous to mention in detail, but the legacy of Christian resources that you helped to create will continue to bless the Kingdom for generations to come. We are blessed to count you among the members of our Advisory Board and have the benefit of your wise counsel. We are honored to have you represent Eastern European Mission in Croatia and look forward to many more years of mutual service to the Lord!

With love in Christ,

Bartosz Rybinski
Vice-President for European Operations
Eastern European Mission

EPC

Pastor Mladen Jovanović has significantly and recognizably continued, and continues to contribute, to the progress of God's action in Croatia, and expands it through his many years of dedicated and sacrificial work in the educational, ecumenical, pastoral, and academic fields. The broadened horizons of his engagements have enriched many generations, and brought them closer to God and His Kingdom, selflessly proving the continuity of effective work and excellence in everything he does. We continuously thank God for such brother-leader-servants, whose lives confirm and are connected to the service like an example to all of us. It is my honor as a younger associate and coworker to have known you for many years, to be friends and collaborate with brother Mladen, a man with wide horizons, a man full of the Word and Spirit of God's love, ready for any new challenge for the Kingdom of God. Let the Lord, brother Mladen, gift you with many years of life and service, strength and health, bravery and wisdom, with much inspiration for sharing the Word and evangelizing. Ad honorem! In the name of the EPC of the Republic of Croatia, with honest love and respect,

M.S. Damir Špoljarić
President of the Evangelical Pentecostal
Churches Alliance in the Republic of Croatia

ACU – DEAN'S OFFICE
Dear Mladen and Dragica,

Congratulations, dear friends, upon the occasion of your receiving the Christian Service Award. What a great honor! I cannot imagine a more deserving couple. I recognize that this award honors not just you but the work of Christ in you. You have always given Him the glory for all that you are and do, which makes the award even more appropriate. You have truly been Christ's servants.

From the very beginning, you became Christian leaders not because it was the easy thing to do nor because you simply chose to do it, but rather because you recognized that Christ had chosen you. Your discipleship has never been of the cheap sort. You sacrificed much. You engaged in serious intellectual work. You walked the narrow and difficult road, more than a few times suffering for the sake of the King whom you serve. You asked, you knocked, you sought, and God has been faithful in opening door after door, not just for you and your family but also for the thousands of people whom you have influenced for the sake of the Kingdom. At the same time you have never worn your service to God as a badge. You have not complained about the hardships. You have not sought the accolades of others. Rather, because God called you to speak, you have spoken. Because God asked for your life, you have given it. Because God granted you gifts, you have used them, and for all His glory. You have served in public ways— through sermons, radio addresses, in the marketplace and in classrooms. But

you have done so quietly— in family devotion, pastoral care, through listening as well as speaking. No wonder so many people love you! You are recognized and appreciated wherever you go because you have honored Christ in all you have done. And so today, I join people all over the world in honoring you. Thank you for modeling Jesus for us. Thank you for your sacrifice and your service. Thank you for touching my life in deep and personal ways. And thank you, on behalf of all of us in the College of Biblical Studies and Abilene Christian University, for your exemplary lives.

Congratulations, Mladen and Dragica. You are Christian servants indeed!

For the sake of the Kingdom,

Jack R. Reese, Dean
College of Biblical Studies

ROCHESTER COLLEGE
Dear Mladen and Dragica,

I count it a high honor to call Mladen Jovanović a friend, colleague, and beloved brother in Christ. You have served the kingdom with such integrity as a writer, radio teacher, minister to a local church, husband and father to your family, and godly personal example to others. The honor being accorded you with the Christian Leadership Award testifies to the high regard so many in both Central Europe and North America have for you. You have lived through historic challenging decades of transition in your beloved homeland from Yugoslavia to Croatia. You not only have served your immediate spiritual charges during that period but also have been instrumental in providing relief supplies and spiritual encouragement to thousands beyond that fellowship of saints. Your influence through the written and oral communication of the gospel has touched more hearts and lives than any human calculation can number. It must be said, however, that nobody could serve so generously and effectively apart from the unselfish support of his life companion. So I not only affirm my love and appreciation for you, Mladen, but for you, Dragica, as well.

May our Gracious God who has blessed and multiplied your faithful service continue to give you health, strength, and courage for your task.

Sincerely,

Rubel Shelly, Ph.D.
President

BAMMEL ROAD CHURCH OF CHRIST
Mladen and Dragica Jovanović – Bammel Road Church of Christ Missionaries for 30 years

Dear Mladen and Dragica,
It is with honor that we celebrate our long and successful history together in serving the Lord's vineyard and Croatia. We celebrate not only seeing the both of you developing as Christian Leaders and mentors to so many, but also being the driving force throughout the country, all of Europe and in the United States. Over the past 30 years, you were the cup of cold water to hundreds, maybe even thousands. During the war you provided shelter, food, and humanitarian needs. You have educated and trained young ministers to start churches and ministries that are ever expanding today. You also work with the government to be the voice of Christian purity and truth to the word of God, and, whereby, the Church of Christ became one of the official recognized churches in Croatia and the only government in all of Europe granting this official status. You are one of the primary voices for the Church of Christ in your radio ministry, Eastern European Mission, and many other works in Europe and the US.

You certainly deserve this Christian Leadership Award and we thank you for our long lasting, close friendship. May God continue to bless both of you in His work in Croatia.

Sincerely,

The Bammel elders

ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY
Dear Mladen and Dragica,

On behalf of Abilene Christian University, I want to congratulate you upon receiving the Christian Service Award from the Zagreb Biblical institute. The two of you have done such important work for the Kingdom, not just in Croatia, but throughout Europe and the rest of the world. We admire your work and honor you today. It has been our privilege to partner with you over the years. You have worked closely with a great number of our faculty and students. We know your influence, seen your gifts and admire your leadership. What an extraordinary ministry team you are! So, ACU joins your many friends from around the world to congratulate you on this special day.

I pray continued blessings to you both as you use your gifts for the sake of the kingdom.

In Him,

Phil Schubert, Ed.D.
President

Articles and commendations after Mladen's Death

From the magazine *Vjerska sloboda* [Religious freedom - ed.]

THE YEARLY DR. BRANKO LOVREC RECOGNITION AWARD

Mladen Jovanović grew up in a working family. Ever since he was little, he had a hunger for books. That hunger led him to a degree at the University of Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb, where he got a job as a professor. During one of his studies, he met a group of Christians, who introduced him to the Bible. They studied the Word of God until his personal meeting with Lord Jesus Christ, who he accepted as his personal savior.

That even greatly affected the life of Mladen and his family. Until the beginning of the '80s of the last century, Mladen worked as a professor at a university in Warsaw. After that, he changed his job to serve as a preacher full time in the Church of Christ. During this time, the Church of Christ in Zagreb was still in the process of being founded, so Mladen dedicated his time to the radio service too. He wished for their evangelism to reach as many people as possible through radio messages. After the first democratic elections in Croatia, the radio service moved from abroad to the homeland. During this time, there were ten radio stations broadcasting messages with Mladen's sermons. When the civil war began, Mladen founded a humanitarian aid organization called "Peace on Earth" which, with the help of many sister communities across Europe and America, selflessly helps refugees and exiles. At the same time, Mladen started the Bible School, which later became the Biblical Institute. Because the hunger for the Word of God was growing. After the war, the Church became a space where the community would meet, then moved to a new location at 21 Kušlanova in Zagreb, where it resides today.

Still, Mladen wasn't just a dedicated church worker, he was also an astounding preacher and excellent theologian. Even now, after his death, many people are inspired by God's Word through his teachings. Because of all this, he was appreciated in many other church communities across Croatia, and also the world. Because he has a master's degree in theology, he was a greatly appreciated lecturer on homiletics at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek at the Biblical Institute in Zagreb. Because of his reputation in Croatia, he would often get invited to lectures all over Europe and America. Among all that, he had many bigger duties in many different associations: the secretary of the Protestant Evangelical Council (PEV), the head of the Council of the Churches of Christ through two mandates, and death met him while he was the president for the Religious Liberty Association in the Republic of Croatia, where he was a longtime member. Because of his service and reputation, he was a common host of Croatian TV and radio. He would happily speak in the name of the churches of reformation heritage about social, political, and theological challenges in

our society. Mladen lived his faith first and foremost in his family. He was a good and faithful husband to his wife Dragica, the center of their marriage was Christ Himself, and they raised all three of their children in the Christian spirit. Their marriage was an example and inspiration for many couples. Their home was always open, their hospitality was zealously nurtured, many were filled with Christ's love that radiated from their relationship.

With Mladen's passing, a great void was created; not just in his family, but in church communities, as well as our society. On the other hand, there was a fortune left behind by Mladen: new Churches that came from once-small church communities in Zagreb, new church leaders, an example of a committed church leader, and above all, an example of a brother in Christ.

Mladen Dominić,
Chairman of the Council of Churches of Christ in Croatia

From the magazine *Obiteljski List* [Family Church Magazine - ed.]
Brother Mladen Jovanović would teach homiletics at Evangelical Theological University in Osijek, where I attended. I will never forget the warm atmosphere he created in his lectures. He would talk to us with respect, validating every thought we had, and encourage us in every situation to do more and do better. We would impatiently wait for his next class, knowing it wouldn't be another boring class, but a "Pearl Bracelet" we needed.

He left a special impression on me with the fact that he saw the call to preach God's word as a precious activity we cannot, and should not, leave to coincidence. The duty of a preacher of God's Word is to bring fresh and rich food to God's people at the Lord's table.

We are convinced that our dear brother is now with the Lord. But even so, he is still here with us through the legacy he left us. Because of his lectures, his students have a more mature mindset; through his sermons, the believers were made through their personal confessions of faith; and through his activities in the media, the citizens of our country were encouraged.

That's proof that efforts for the Lord are not in vain!

David Kovačević
Deacon of God's Church in the Republic of Croatia
Teacher at Evangelical Theological University in Osijek

I met Mladen some thirty years ago. At the time, I was a young man who was only discovering and researching different types of Christian service, and Mladen had already been a preacher at the Church of Christ in Amruševa for about ten years. At the beginning, we'd meet at prayer meetings in the homes of different evangelical Christians from different denominations, where we'd get to know each other, pray, and search for different ways to work together. Later, during the civil war, our cooperation was intensified through helping the refugees and exiles, printing joint editions of Christian literature, and other projects. Mladen has left the impression of a real gentleman since the beginning: courteous, educated, polite, but at the same time a humble and approachable servant of the Lord, ready for a conversation with anyone, even some young man who is just starting to explore the world of different Christians. Mladen was a man of broad views and interests, but above all, he was a lover of the written and spoken word. I was among countless people who loved listening to Mladen's excellently prepared and inspirationally spoken sermons. They were always words that came from the Word, written and embodied in our Lord Jesus Christ. Although we worked together through different organizations and projects for many years, every memory of Mladen for me will be a memory of a servant of the Word, the one "who has become a disciple in the Kingdom of Heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old," (Matthew 13:52).

Željko Mraz
Main Secretary of the Baptist Church Alliance of the Republic of Croatia

Even though I've known Mladen since the time when PEV did not exist, the best years of our friendship and cooperation were through our work for PEV. At first, as a head of the Council of the Churches of Christ, and later as the main Secretary of PEV, Mladen was always extremely constructive: as it is proposed, so it should be executed. He always kept in mind that the decisions that were made had positive outcomes for every individual and community that PEV served. To listen, think, suggest, and, in the end, be prepared to correct some attitude, some decision that wasn't good enough, that was Mladen. It is the effort that he, along with our then-president Bishop Josip Jendrički, put into preparing our assemblies in Vinkovci, as well as during all other contributions of PEV, for which we will stay forever grateful.

Giorgio Grlj
President of the Protestant Evangelical Council (PEV)

For the past three decades, we've had Mladent Jovanović with us, an associate in the gospel, but also a reliable friend. Mladen was a man made of the Word, actually, a servant of the Word, who, in his eloquence, was careful in his choice of words. Together with the Biblical author, we can freely say that Mladen was the one who "searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true" (Ecclesiastes 12:10). Through his profession, he was a man of chosen words, but who never sugarcoated the truth into pretty words. He was a reliable man in his daily

operations, a man of his word. In versatile engagement from the Church of Christ up to today's Biblical Institute, he put in great effort and work in his theological-biblical role. All in all, as the Lord Himself teaches us and encourages us, Mladen was more than a servant, he was a friend to many of us. A man who didn't allow himself to drift in academic heights. We thank the Lord our God for the life of our friend, brother, and associate Mladen. "[May the] Lord make His face shine upon you" (Numbers 6:25). And to us, "those who remain", may he be more than just a bright memory, but a permanent example to us all, who continue the Lord's work until further notice.

Danijel Berković
Evangelical Pentecostal Church in the Republic of Croatia

God's Church in Croatia, one of the church families of evangelical inheritance, had the chance to work with brother Mladen in many different ways. That cooperation was expressed through PEV, Evangelical Theological University, Project "Valley of Blessings" in Vukovar, and a special blessing we shared in the opportunities of his visits to our communities. He proclaimed his faith in Lord Jesus selflessly, with simplicity, and with clearly emphasized, Biblical statements on every occasion. His approach radiated Christ's love, while his bright face radiated the closeness of a brotherly man.

I remember when brother Mladen visited the church community in Vukovar, and was greeting a brother in Christ, when someone told him: "Brother Mladen, a bright face like yours is always welcome in Vukovar!" Brother Mladen testified Christianity at work to us, inheriting our Lord Jesus Christ.

Matej Lazar Kovačević
Overseer of God's Church in the Republic of Croatia

Mladen Jovanović's importance starts in Croatia, but spreads across Eastern and Western Europe, all the way to the USA. It's hard to understand how one man can bless so many lives through such a diverse geographical area. Such an influence can only be explained through a unique anointing of the Holy Spirit, in a life submissive to God's will. As a young university lecturer, Mladen was encouraged to study the primary source of the truth of Christianity: the Bible. The Holy Spirit, who works through the letters, has captured his heart, and made the message of the Gospel alive, and produced faith in Christ. Until then, Mladen dreamed of becoming a university professor, but God had other, and bigger, plans. He would teach at universities in Croatia, Austria, Poland, and the USA. His teachings gave him a chance to found Churches, train Christian leaders for the Kingdom, and encourage students to give their lives to the service of Jesus Christ. His teachings also give him the chance to preach. Sunday after Sunday, Mladen would share his carefully crafted sermons, first in the small community in Zagreb founded by himself and others, then sermons through radio revealed this effective communicator of the simple, but powerful, message of the Gospel in Yugoslavia. One leader in a Rimocatholic Church said: "You in the Church of

Christ have the most influential preacher in the whole of Croatia in Mladen Jovanović." Aside from personal preaching, Mladen also taught others the skill of preaching, who now share the word across Central and Eastern Europe. Mladen aspired to live the message he preached about. God's love was a constant topic in his messages. "This love has to express itself in love and acceptance of others," he'd say in his sermons and conversations. Mladen's love and acceptance produced a reputation of inclusion, not exclusion, in a tradition that was often considered exclusive. Uniting the churches, as well as individuals, was something that was always on Mladen's heart. Theological beliefs exist, and are too often divided, but for Mladen, the unity of the Spirit that is found in Christ's love will always overcome personal beliefs. "Have trust that the Holy Spirit will work," he would often say in his teachings, as well as, "if we are teachable in humility, we will all grow towards a more complete understanding."

Our brother Mladen loved people, especially young Christians, with a love that expressed itself through Paul's description of love. He was patient with those who grew in their understanding. He was polite with others who disagreed with him. He was never rude, but always tried to see the best in everyone. He was quick to protect, especially young Churches and their communities. He carried a love which trusted that Christ would unify. His hope was in God, that He will work through every new generation of Church followers. As Mladen's reputation grew, secular media and other church communities wanted to hear his thoughts and opinions. He was a leader among preachers and Churches throughout Croatia and the southern area of Central Europe. Whenever a moral or ethical question was asked, it was Mladen's voice that answered, but his responses always came from the truth he found in the Holy Scripture.

He was a man with a contagious smile and witty stories, but also an intellectual. He read diversely, loved music, and appreciated art. His sermons showed widespread knowledge, portrayals of history, literature, and current events. Educated and cultured, but always a student, Mladen always searched for new understandings and deeper truths. He had many accomplishments and a big influence. Founded Churches and equipped Chrisitan followers are his legacy, but above all, Mladen was a man of God who was devoted to Christ and His truth as it is declared in the Bible. Mladen Jovanović was my friend and brother. God used him to share our calling and move to Croatia. Together, we led the local Church. We shared an office and a dream to help educate and equip effective followers for Christ, but most of all, Mladen and Dragica shared their family with us. Sandra and I were invited to become a part of Mladen Jovanović's family. This dear man was, and still is, in a very personal way, God's gift to me.

Tom Sibley
Church of Christ Elder

IN THANKS TO BROTHER MLADEN JOVANOVIĆ

In the middle of 2013, the Head Committee of the Religious Freedom Association in the Republic of Croatia made a unanimous decision to make brother Mladen Jovanović M.S. the president of the Association. It happened during a session held in the Islamic Center in Zagreb. I remember our short conversion after the session when we were walking to the parking lot. Mladen shared a few of his thoughts with me that I remember even today: "Brother Matak, it's my honor to serve in this role in the Association. I will strive to do my best, now that I am retired, and I have fewer responsibilities in the Church."

I noticed these words because they were said humbly, from the heart, without any diplomatic routine. Brother Mladen worked diligently and consciously in the Association ever since its founding a full twenty years ago. Most of us in the Head Committee joined the Association after its founding. For us, Mladen was a veteran in endeavors to promote religious freedom. However, he was never patronizing toward us, but was always ready to serve those close to him, and us, for the joy of his Lord.

Then one Friday evening, something happened that stunned us all, and we will only understand in eternity. Why did our brother Mladen fall asleep in the Lord that night? Even in the last hours of his life, we talked about the Association. Although, he was on a trip for some time, and then we were discussing the agenda for the next meeting of the Head Committee, which he was supposed to preside over. However, this was the end of his life on this Earth. Even though the sudden death stopped the noble work of this dear man, we are left with the encouragement of the bright traces of his commitment to our Savior, who, with His baptism, guarantees another meeting with brother Mladen and everyone who fell asleep in the Lord.

Thank God for brother Mladen. We thank his family for the support of his service, and thank all the people who helped him through his steep life path.

In the name of the Religious Freedom Association, I offer my deepest condolences to everyone who Mladen touched with his life. We encourage each other with the guarantee of another meeting, because Christ is our life, challenges in life are only inconveniences, and death is only a dream.

Dragutin Matak,
Main Secretary of the Association and Professor at Adventist Universities

From the Magazine *Duhovno Vrelo* [Spiritual Hot Spring - ed.]

I joked around with Mladen at the last worship of a conference titled "Our Beautiful" [A reference to the Croatian national anthem: "Our Beautiful Homeland" -ed.], where he was the main speaker, and I was the director. After the sermon, I made a comment on how he could comfortably pass as a charismatic or pentecostal. It was so overwhelming, but it was always overwhelming when Mladen would speak, even when he spoke quietly. Last time I saw him was during our regular pastoral meeting before the summer. He asked me what was going on with the magazine, considering it only publishes once a year now, and I used this opportunity to ask him to write an article for the upcoming issue. With the article, he sent me a picture which would go with the author's signature. We joked around then, which was characteristic of him, about how the photograph should be edited so that he looked at least twenty years younger. How I wish we had those twenty years ahead of us now. I met Mladen at my baptism, twenty years ago, maybe less. We would see each other at social gatherings, worship, and our monthly pastoral meetings. If I were to describe Mladen in one word, it would be "a real gentleman". A Christian gentleman. An excellent preacher, and the best speaker. Diplomatic. Wise. Friend. Brother. Witty, Unique and special. Mladen is an institution. So forgive me, I currently can't find a single word to express what I feel. It is only possible for him to do that with his eloquence. His relationships toward others were as Abraham Lincoln described: "With malice toward none, with charity for all." I can't say we're friends, not really, but then again, who can say Mladen wasn't their friend? But we were brothers, that's for sure. I admired his preaching abilities. He was my role model. He would always encourage me. Later, he accepted me as an equal, a pastor colleague, a preacher. He left "in strength, as old patriarchs," (to serve myself with the words of Demos Shakarian) unexpectedly. Still, we had the luck and "honor to live at the same time as him" (to use Mladen's words).

Brother Mladen, I will miss you. See you.

Goran Punda
Pastor of EPC Jelenovac
Head Editor of Duhovno Vrelo

Our family received hundreds of condolences after the news of Mladen's unexpected death. Of course, it's impossible to publish them all, but each and every one is received with due thanks and respect. Telegrams, letters, phone calls, emails, messages, it all meant so much to us. Thank you all!

We were surprised how many people shared alongside their condolences their experiences of how Mladen helped them in some way: advice, a kind word, or a hug, how it meant so much to them, and how they will remember it forever.

Actually, we weren't that surprised, we just weren't aware of how far-reaching his influence was.

