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Crossing the Divide

The 1992-95 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) left a people divided along ethno-religious lines. Even the country itself is divided according to the Dayton Peace Accords into two separate entities –Republika Srpska (the Serb-majority entity) and the Muslim/Croat Federation. In this divided environment, people from the Republika Srpska and the Federation look for creative ways to come together. On February 17, 2001, the interreligious choir, Pontanima, traveled from Sarajevo in the Muslim-Croat Federation to perform in Banja Luka in Republika Srpska. The choir sang the religious songs of all the major ethno-religious groups represented in Bosnia-Herzegovina (Muslim, Catholic Christian, Orthodox Christian and Jewish).

The choir has performed more than 100 concerts throughout the Federation, but this was their first concert in Republika Srpska. Until now, the choir's inter-religious nature had not been welcomed in Republika Srpska. The concert is a concrete measure of the progress in the slow healing and reconciliation process of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

"You don't know how much this concert means to us" Sinisa Simidzija, a peace activist from Banja Luka told MCC worker Karin Kaufman Wall. "We haven't heard many of these songs since the war. As a Serb, I thank you for bringing them to us."

Pontanima (Latin, meaning "bridge to the soul") is a project of Face to Face Interreligious Service in Sarajevo. Founded in 1996, Pontanima's mission is to increase interaction and foster understanding between the religious groups, thereby reducing fear and hate and opening the way to reconciliation in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The choir includes more than 50 people from all ethnic groups in Bosnia. Their repertoire includes music from the Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Protestant, Muslim, and Jewish traditions.

"Through the greatest examples of spirituality in music, these singers work at overcoming interpersonal prejudices, building trust, and healing the deep wounds of the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina...Through its unity and through the quality of singing which it displays, the choir is witness to a reality of mutual respect and cooperation quite different from that which prevails in Bosnia and Herzegovina today." says Bosnian Franciscan priest, Ivo Marković, the director of Face to Face.

Concerts are being planned in Zagreb, Croatia and Belgrade, Yugoslavia for this spring. It will be Pontanima's first appearance in Yugoslavia.

MCC workers, John and Karin Kaufman Wall, Newton, KS, are former program managers of Face to Face Interreligious Service and coordinated the activities of Pontanima.