

**Jim Satterwhite,
Historian**

It is not often that a historian gets to be present at an event that is truly historical. I had such an experience this last Saturday, when I traveled with the interreligious choir from Sarajevo to Banja Luka in the "Republika Srpska" [Serbian part of Bosnia]. This choir sang last Spring in Bluffton, as part of a tour around the US, but this concert had special significance here. It was the first time since the war in Bosnia that an interreligious group from the Muslim-Croat federation had gone to sing in the heart of the Serbian area. It is important to remember that "interreligious" is the same thing here as "interethnic," that the war in Bosnia was fought among the three main ethno-religious groups, and - as in Ireland - religion provided the basis for cultural identity. So, this concert was important because it was an INTERRELIGIOUS choir singing music from ALL of the religious traditions of the area. The members of the choir come from the Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Muslim and Jewish faiths, and sang music from these traditions. (Some of the choir members describe themselves as atheists or agnostics, which underscores the fact that religion, per se, is not the main issue). Also, the fact that people who had suffered at the hands of the Serbs during the war were willing to put their heart into singing Serbian Orthodox church music made an impression on many. The war was fought here on the principle that people of different ethno-religious backgrounds cannot live together, and among many Serbs, Islam carries negative associations from the 500 years of Ottoman Turkish rule. Banja Luka was the place where not only were non-Serbs ethnically "cleansed" from the area during the war, but 30 mosques, including one that was a Bosnian cultural and historical treasure, were dynamited by Serb paramilitary extremists early in the war so as to remove any vestige of the Muslim presence in the area. Unlike in Germany after the Second World War, there has been very little attempt by any side to critically examine its own actions during the war, so since Banja Luka remains a stronghold of Serbian nationalism there was some apprehension among some of the choir members about how the concert would be received. Would the fact that music from "enemy" groups was featured go to be a problem?

As it turned out things went quite well. The group was welcomed, and the music was appreciated. The Islamic music that was sung received a lot of applause, and some people in the audience remarked later that there should have been more Islamic music. The seemingly ordinary event, an ecumenical concert, thus served as a kind of milestone on the way to reconciliation. As the program stated:

"The Face to Face Interreligious Service in Sarajevo was founded with the aim of affirming the positive, peaceful power of religions through the process of reconciliation in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The central project of the Face to Face Interreligious Center is the choir PONTANIMA (Latin meaning "bridge to the soul"), where women and men are invited to sing together without regard for their religious affiliation. 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."

In the midst of all of the problems still facing this area, some healing is taking place, as evidenced by this concert. For me personally and as a historian it was a rare privilege to be present on such an occasion. I have been asked to give lectures in different places on nonviolent movements for social change, but this concert was a good example in itself. At the same time, I had the opportunity to meet the parents of Adriana Lazinica - who graduated from Bluffton in December 1999 - and to further learn about life in Bosnia today.