

Louder than words: Missiological authenticity

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [February 6, 2007](#) issue

Jason Byassee's article on [Christians in Jordan](#) reminded me of some conversations I had early in my ministry with a fellow pastor in Indiana who had served many years as a missionary in Iran. This was before the revolution that transformed Iran into an Islamic state. I was curious about this pastor's life in Iran and about his missionary work: Was there a church? How many members were there? How many converts had he made and how had he done it?

When I pressed him to tell me some success stories, he explained that in that culture it was forbidden for a Muslim to convert to Christianity and that anyone who openly espoused Christianity would be disowned by family, unable to find employment, and perhaps even physically persecuted. He explained that he could not be seen to be proselytizing or distributing Christian literature. In one conversation he gently chastised me for being so American in my need for statistical evidence that the considerable Presbyterian investment in his work was succeeding. I have never forgotten his explanation that God had called him to witness by the way he lived and the way he loved his neighbors, and that he had to trust God with the results.

A similar perspective was offered years later when I was representing my denomination on a visit to Croatia, not long after the shooting between Croats, Serbs and Bosnians had stopped. The Croats are mostly Roman Catholic; the Serbs, Orthodox; and the Bosnians, Muslim. The conflict was about more than religion, but religion added fuel to the fire.

We visited Vukovar, where retreating Serbian forces targeted public buildings, the soul of the community, for destruction: schools, libraries, hospitals. We visited Vinkovsci, where the Serbs had blown up the Roman Catholic cathedral and where the Catholics retaliated by blowing up the neighboring Orthodox cathedral. In Vinkovsci we visited the small Reformed church, which had sustained a direct mortar

hit and which had been repaired with funds from our denomination. We also met Peter Kuzmic, an American who calls himself a Calvinist Pentecostal and who presides over the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek and also holds a chair in world missions at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Kuzmic has pleaded with American evangelicals to stop using terms like “evangelical crusade” and “Balkan harvest” when they come to the region. He calls instead for “missiological authenticity.”

Kuzmic told me about a Serbian businessman named Antol who quit his job to go to work for the Agape Project, a refugee resettlement initiative. Antol’s new job was to bring together money, materials and labor to rebuild Muslim villages that had been destroyed in the war. While reviewing rebuilding plans submitted by a Muslim village chief, Antol noticed that the plans did not include rebuilding the mosques that had been leveled. “Why no mosques?” Antol asked. The chief explained that he knew Antol was a Christian, so he assumed that there would be no help in rebuilding mosques. Antol answered: “We will help you rebuild your mosque because we follow Jesus, who told us to love our neighbors. And he told a story once about a man who stopped beside the road to help a victim whose religion was different from his own.” That is missiological authenticity.