

Journey to Belgrade: Religious partnership

by [Joan Brown Campbell](#)

This article appears in the [May 19, 1999](#) issue.

Jesse Jackson would be the first to say that the religious leaders who accompanied him to Belgrade in late April were not just his props. While the media coverage didn't show the extraordinary breadth of our 15-member interfaith delegation, that breadth was our strength. And the key to the mission's success lay precisely in the solidarity that we—Christians, Muslims and Jews—shared with each other and especially with our Yugoslav counterparts, who had asked us urgently to come to Belgrade. By going, by putting ourselves ever so briefly under the same bombing they endure night after night, we believe we helped to strengthen their witness for peace.

We went because people in that country needed our support. We responded as we had responded to Desmond Tutu in South Africa and to other partners in other places. We stepped forward from our position of power and safety in order to give some strength to religious leaders in a difficult situation. Because communities of faith have ties that cross the boundaries of nation-states, we can still talk with each other even when our nations are at war with each other. There is a unique role that people of faith can play.

We rejoice in having won the three captured U.S. soldiers' freedom. We believe that their freedom opens a small window of opportunity for peace. We pray that the window will remain open long enough to give peace a chance.

The delegation that left for Belgrade on April 28 and returned to the U.S. on May 3 included Protestant, Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians, along with Rabbi Steven Bennett Jacobs and Dr. Nazir Uddin Khaja, M.D., board chairman and president of the American Muslim Council. It was crucial that this be an interfaith delegation, and especially that it include a Muslim, given that so many of the Albanians are Muslims. With two exceptions, this was a delegation of clergy.

Our capacity as the National Council of Churches to organize a very effective interfaith delegation with a man of Jesse Jackson's stature gave heart to Orthodox member churches that their concerns, and the part of the world they come from, could get front-and-center attention from the NCC.

We went to Yugoslavia as partners of the extraordinarily diverse religious communities there—Serbian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Muslim and Jewish. It was especially Patriarch Pavle, head of the Serbian Orthodox Church, who had pressed us to come, emphasizing the importance of such a visit for all people caught in the conflict over Kosovo—Albanians and Serbs as well as members of the many ethnic, cultural and religious minorities in Yugoslavia.

It is not well known in the U.S. that Patriarch Pavle, together with the bishops of his church, has called for the cessation of violence in Kosovo, the protection and safety of all who live in Kosovo—Serb and Albanian alike—the end of the bombing in Yugoslavia and the release of the three captured U.S. soldiers. He was making these points well before our delegation arrived.

The witness for peace and justice given by Patriarch Pavle, a man of prayer, spiritual integrity and moral vision, is a profile in spiritual courage. His witness against violence has been consistent from the beginning of the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia, through the war in Bosnia, and now in conjunction with the conflict over Kosovo.

It is also not well known in the U.S. that the Serbian Orthodox bishop in Kosovo, Artemije, has for several years insisted that the conflict in Kosovo can be resolved only through free and honest dialogue between the ethnic communities in conflict. And this, he warned, has been impossible because the government in Belgrade, as a dictatorship, has blocked democracy and freedom in Yugoslavia, while in Kosovo acts of terrorism and a culture of violence have set the stage for escalating violence. Bishop Artemije is a man of Christian faith and ministry, a bishop and pastor, not a man of political calculation.

Our delegation visited Patriarch Pavle at the Serbian Orthodox Patriarchate in Belgrade. We also met with other representatives of the various religious communities in Yugoslavia. At this encounter we saw our American religious pluralism mirrored by the religious pluralism of Yugoslavia. The Christian, Jewish and Muslim voices at this meeting expressed the dismay and agony the religious

communities experience in the midst of the suffering of their land and people. It was again Patriarch Pavle who spoke of the suffering in Kosovo and the suffering in all of Yugoslavia as a result of the bombing campaign, and who called for an end to violence.

Our delegation, which defined itself as a religious delegation coming to Yugoslavia to make a humanitarian appeal, also met with Yugoslav political leaders—the foreign minister, the president of parliament and President Slobodan Milosevic.

We spoke an honest word to Milosevic; we spoke truth to power. We were not negotiating for our government—that was clear. In fact, the U.S. government had warned us that it could not guarantee our safety. We went with a very specific request to Milosevic to free the three Americans held in Yugoslavia—that is something a religious group can do on a humanitarian basis.

We urged their release as a dramatic gesture that could open the way to a peaceful resolution of the conflict. We stressed that in itself such a dramatic humanitarian gesture would not end the bombing—that commitments and guarantees would need to be negotiated by those authorized and competent to negotiate in order to secure withdrawal of Yugoslav forces from Kosovo, the safe return of refugees to Kosovo, the introduction of an appropriate international force into Kosovo, and the end of the bombing. We shared our impression that the NATO military action would be unrelenting until the safety of the people of Kosovo is assured. But we again emphasized that the release of the three Americans could open the way to the process that could break the cycle of violence.

The release of the three American soldiers and their journey with us from Belgrade to Zagreb and then to Germany was for all of us a dramatic and emotional experience. We had used our best thinking, our best insights and our best skills in our conversations in Belgrade. But the liberation of our three soldiers was in the last analysis an answer to prayer.

In fact, we prayed together often as a delegation and we prayed with everyone we met, even with Milosevic. Since our return, many have asked us, "How dare you pray for Milosevic?" We did so mindful of Jesus' command to pray for, even to love, our enemies. We do not hold Milosevic blameless, not at all. But neither do we believe that demonization is theologically justifiable, or even helpful. None of us in the delegation—not even Dr. Khaja, for whom it must have been the most difficult

act—chose to place Milosevic outside the circle of candidates for redemption. We shook Milosevic's hand and prayed for him for God's sake and for the sake of peace.

Were we used by Milosevic? We believe we were used by God to break the cycle of violence and to build a bridge of trust.

Upon our return to Washington, D.C., we met with President Clinton, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, National Security Adviser Sandy Berger and Chief of Staff John Podesta. We gave an account of our journey, our meetings, our experiences and perceptions. We urged that the path of negotiations be pursued energetically. The president's assessment of the Kosovo crisis gave us some elements of hope. There is a commitment to the protection both of the ethnic Albanians and the Serbs in Kosovo. There is a commitment to the rebuilding of the Balkans, including Yugoslavia, after the military and ethnic violence ends.

During the days which followed we were pleased to see that the military actions, which continued, were accompanied by a strengthened diplomatic effort. Now we see that the diplomatic effort may be jeopardized by the error made in targeting the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade.

The journey of our religious and humanitarian delegation strengthened us in our solidarity with innocent people who suffer in the conflict, whether on the ground in Kosovo, in the refugee camps in the surrounding region, or in other parts of Yugoslavia (including Kosovo) as a result of the NATO bombing. We came home strengthened in our commitment to work as people of religious faith to end the cycle of violence. We returned strengthened in our determination to continue the efforts which faith-based humanitarian agencies are making in the Balkans to provide assistance and support to the expelled and deported and all victims of violence. And when the military conflict ends, we will do what we can to assist in the rebuilding and reconstruction of the whole region.