

YLTS 2002 – ZLATIBOR, SERBIA “LEADERS OF THE NEW GENERATION”

***EQUIPPING SERBIAN YOUTH WORKERS: The DOHI Youth Leadership Seminar
Continues to Bear Fruit in Eastern
Europe***



The multinational team that put the seminar together. From left: Viktor Kostov, DOHI's program director for Balkan projects, Paul H. Paupov, DOHI's international president, Dr. Marvin Penner, the main speaker and youth specialist, and Lazar Stoistic, General Secretary of the Serbian Evangelical Alliance.

By Viktor Kostov, DOHI Project Director in the Balkans

SOFIA, September 2002 – The evangelical church of Serbia is small but vigilant. This is my overall impression from the five-day fellowship and teaching we, the team from DOHI, experienced with our brothers and sisters in Serbia. Our time together was marked yet one more time by the presence of the Holy Spirit and a sense of fellowship and unity of Christians of different denominations and various nations.

PUTTING IT TOGETHER



Robert Todoroski, participant from Macedonia, checks out the line of vehicles on the Macedonian-Serbian border. We had to go back to Bulgaria to enter Serbia that day.

As in our prior seminars it did take a team effort to put this one together. The work toward having the training in Zlatibor was indeed a fine testimony of God's will and plan to have his children work together toward his purposes. The Bulgarian team (Galia and Viktor) organized the schedule, the seminar information and forms and translated them into Serbian; our great help in Belgrade, brother Lazar Stoistic (pronounced: "Stoishich"), a General Secretary of the Serbian Evangelical Alliance, sent out the information and the word about the training to the different churches and arranged the facilities; Paul Popov, the president of DOHI, worked with the main lecturer, Dr. Marvin Penner, to arrange three YLTS training sessions in three different countries; Marv, a man who loves God, kids and has experience in youth work, was the main contributor to the teaching and training times. And, of course, the participants – 29 youth workers who came from various parts of Serbia to take part in the seminar.

We did put work and hours in making this training happen, but without the grace and the covering of God, this event would not have been what it came out to be—a blessing for all who took part in it.

VARIOUS PEOPLE FROM VARIOUS PLACES

One of our main goals in conducting the YLTS, from the very beginning in 2000, was to see young Christian workers from different confessions come together. It is one thing to see another Christian as a representative of a doctrine that you do not hold on to. It is an entirely different thing to eat, sleep and fellowship together. And best of all—go on a mountain hike together! Relationships between "denominations" are then traded for relationships between "live children" of our Father in heaven.

This year's Serbian seminar definitely achieved its purpose in this regard. There were representatives of seven different denominations in Serbia at the training:

* Church of God, Baptist Church, Evangelical Apostolic Church, Evangelical Church, Pentecostal Church, Assemblies of God, Christ Pentecostal Church

INTERACTIVE TEACHING

I like to introduce Marv Penner as “someone who loves God and kids, and has a lot of experience with youth ministry.” I am fond of this introduction because it is short yet complete. Marv’s teaching is not only academic lecturing. When I spoke with some of the participant youth workers they shared that the material was really good. It was good indeed because Marv teaches from his own life, from his heart. There is genuine strength in the Word of God. However, this strength is even greater when it comes from a man whose life goal is to live God’s call and what he preaches. The real life examples of Marv’s deep interaction with young people illustrated the principles of Bible-based youth ministry which are the core of his message. There was time for work in small groups, where the youth leaders were able to understand their own experiences in light of the new material.



Marv fellowships with youth workers at dinner time.

I’ve seen Bulgarian workers relate to Marv’s teaching in our previous YLT seminars. It was no surprise that Serbian youth workers were touched in a very similar way. Marv does not hold on to recognition of his academic position and achievements—his ability to be personable during meals and sharing times only enhances his effectiveness as a teacher. He strives to be sensitive to the local culture which has been traditionally suspicious of North American input, especially after the war of NATO against Yugoslavia in 1999. Yet, the youth leaders were getting a new vision and excitement for their work under Dr. Penner’s teaching.



Time to worship the Lord Jesus

THE HIKE

To take a hike is not only an English idiom with a very specific meaning but a part of our schedule at the YLTS. It was no different this year. Knowing the spiritual and physical challenges this exercise offers, I was expecting some good time of bonding, spiritual lessons, and “rebellion in the ranks” to take place. On the second day of the training, after a full day of classroom time, we were on our way to *Chigota*, a 1,400 meter (4,200 feet) tall peak in the mountains of Zlatibor. Tired, hungry and arriving in small groups, all of us made it to the top.

We saw lessons regarding the church and about spiritual pilgrimage in the different ways and times by which we reached the top. There was time for games and fun, too. And at the end, all were happy to be going downhill. If nothing else, this hike had the effect of strengthening the focus of the seminar—on the next day everyone was happy to spend time in the classroom and working in small groups!

NEW VISION

The situation in Serbia is very similar to that of Bulgaria spiritually. The people are not open to the gospel, many claim Orthodox faith, but are in fact nominal believers or even atheists. Ministers are struggling financially and the support for Christian work comes mainly from the church in the West. (Yet Serbia is notably lacking the work of Western mission agencies, unlike, let’s say, Albania or Romania.) The young people in general see no future for themselves in the country but hope to make it to the West—true about Christian youth as well. The cultural patterns are still reminiscent of the communist-type worldview. Yet, being together with those young Christian leaders, many of whom face the challenge of ministering in a hostile culture day-by-day, was a very special time for all of us. My Serbian did improve a little—although Serbian and Bulgarian differ as, maybe, Spanish and Portuguese. My time with brother Lazar was one of fellowship and friendship, as if we had known each other for a long time (this was our first time meeting face-to-face). When, during our prayer times, I prayed for revival of the gospel work in

Serbia, and when the Serbian brothers prayed for my boys who were struggling with a fever back in Sofia, it felt like we are indeed the church of Jesus Christ, a new nation, not limited by ethnic differences.



Viktor prays with youth workers after the evening meeting.

As the result of the good time of fellowship, equipping and teaching, there came the idea that we continue our partnership with Lazar and the Evangelical Alliance of Serbia—in order to provide such seminars for youth leaders on a more regular basis. We did achieve an agreement in general terms as to the possible bringing of teachers from the region to hold regional YLT seminars. Yet, we would ask you for your intercession and prayer so all future details of this vision and plan falls into place.

THE MAIN GOALS OF YLTS

It is not easy to measure in quantity terms the effects on human souls and equipping workers with spiritual assets to touch the souls of young people. But our overall general impression, and based on the testimonies and the responses to our feed-back questionnaire at the end of the seminar, was that the purposes for which we organized the YLTS were largely met. Those ends were:

- Workers from different Christian churches and denominations to come together for **fellowship**.
- To build up **vision** and strengthen workers who devote their time to teenagers.
- To facilitate **networking** among individual youth leaders and their churches for the goal of reaching the young generation with the gospel.
- To equip youth leaders with practical **skills** and Bible knowledge in their ministry to youth.

I feel that all of those goals, by the grace of God, through the teaching of his word and the fellowship of the saints (with the goal to reach young people) were fulfilled to the extent available through this seminar format. The extent to which we have been touched by heaven with the vision of reaching young souls for Jesus remains to be seen in the future work and life of those who came together for this training. And of course, our YLTS is only one small part of the investment our Lord has planned for His workers and, in particular, for those bringing the gospel to the teens of today.



It's small group discussion time!

Thank you for all your prayers and partnership as we experienced the grace of God and your intercession in the wonderful 5 days we had in Zlatibor, Serbia. Please, continue to pray for the growth of this ministry, not in quantity, but in quality of equipping young people and their leaders. *Yours in the Lord, the YLTS team*



one of the breaks from teaching youth ministry (above).

Playing volleyball during



Up the mount toward the peak Chigota, 1,400 meters (4,200 feet)



Marv teaches at the top of the mountain and Sandra (left) translates in Serbian.