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Pentecostalism in Southeastern Serbia¹

Abstract

The paper gives a survey of the history of the Serbian evangelist movement, significantly influenced by Roma participation: the greatest religious communities are concentrated in Roma *mahalas* in Niš, Leskovac, Vranje and other towns in Southeastern Serbia. Leskovac, which boasts an exclusively Roma Pentecostal Church (better known as “The Church under the Tent”, with a few hundred baptized believers), is considered as the center of Evangelical Christianity. In conclusion, we are discussing the potentials of evangelism of Southern Serbia for encouraging ethnic reaffirmation by cultural rebirth and by advocating for political dialogue and praxis.

Keywords: Pentecostalism, Serbia, Southeastern Serbia, Roma People.

The Basic Characteristics and Development of Pentecostalism²

■ Though popularized in the early twentieth century in the USA (Charles Fox Parham and William J. Seymour), the Pentecostal Movement³ is founded on the perfectionist and charismatic

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² More extensively on the development of the Pentecostal religious communities on the Balkans and in Serbia in Тоџоровић 2011b, 2012a.

³ Pentecost (Greek Πεντηκοστή (Pentēkostē) meaning “fiftieth,” the Feast of Weeks or the Feast of 50 days); the Christian festival celebrating the descent of the Holy Spirit on the disciples of Jesus after his Ascension, held on the seventh Sunday after Easter. It refers to the final Jewish festival celebrated on the fiftieth day after Passover – celebration of the Mosaic covenant at Mount Sinai.

movements of the nineteenth century, most of all the Methodist Holiness movement and the Catholic Apostolic Movement after Edward Irving (Anderson 2005). This led to many teachers and students turning to the study of the Holy Scripture in order to find the evidence for baptism by the Holy Spirit.

As a world movement, Pentecostalism passed through three periods in its historical development: 1. *Classical Pentecostalism* (at the time of its origin, it attracted socially, economically and psychologically deprived persons while the contents of their gatherings included prayers, intense physical manifestations, healings, glossolalia); 2. *Neo-Pentecostalism* or *Charismatic Renewal* (in the fifties of the twentieth century spread among middle and high classes; independent groups were formed; stressed is life in the Spirit and practice of special spiritual gifts; schooling of pastors started in their own schools); and 3. *The third wave* (in the eighties of the twentieth century; insistence on the experience of the Power of the Holy Spirit in healing the sick, exorcising demons, receiving prophecies and participating in other manifestations of the Pentecostal type) (Marinović Bobinac 1999).

In time three different traditions of the Pentecostal denominations became crystallized: 1. denomination of Holiness-Pentecostal tradition (continuing the original Azusa Street views); 2. denominations of the Baptist-Pentecostal tradition (denomination of the *Assemblies of God*); and 3. denominations of the Oneness Pentecostal tradition (denomination formed out of the doctrinal divisions within the *Assemblies of God* between 1914 and 1916 that refuse to believe in the Holy Trinity). Nine more important characteristics of the Pentecostal movement are: 1. focus on Jesus Christ; 2. stress on the celebration of God the Father and Son Jesus Christ; 3. love for the Word of God; 4. belief that God speaks to his people even today; 5. preaching of the Gospels; 6. awareness of evil; 7. stress on the use of spiritual gifts (gifts of speaking in tongues, of prophesy and healing); 8. eschatological waiting for the second coming of Christ; 9. works within the Power of the Holy Spirit (celebration, preaching of the Gospels, service of healing, exorcism and conquering evil and service with spiritual gifts) (Jambrek 2007, 286).

The Pentecostals, like other Protestants, have two main rituals that most of them would refer to as *ordinances*, the ordinance of baptism and the ordinance of Holy Communion or the Lord's Supper as well as three subsidiary ones: ritual of dedicating children (parents together with the communion pray for the health of their children), wedding and funeral service. In the Pentecostal movement of the greatest importance is glossolalia or speaking in tongues when people appear to speak in languages unknown to them as well as "baptism in the Holy Spirit", as a sign that the Holy Spirit "poured out upon" the believer. After the first water baptism, the phenomenon of "speaking in tongues", expressed in incomprehensible utterances, shouts and sighs, is considered as a clear sign of baptism in the Holy Spirit.

Soon the message of the Gospels preached in the Power of the Holy Spirit spread across North America to Europe, namely, Scandinavian countries, Italy, as well as Middle and South America, Africa and Asia. The movement also grew in Russia, Bulgaria and Romania, mostly thanks to returnees from America.⁴ Referring to the latest world research, Jambrek (2007, 183) states that in mid-2000, out of 1,999,564,000 Christians in the world, 523,767,000 participated in the Pentecostal Charismatic movement.⁵ Using the data from the World Christian Encyclopedia (2001), Anderson (2005) presents the data that the overall number of the Pentecostals of all kinds is 535 million, out of which 65 million are Pentecostals, 175 million Charismatics and 295 million followers of the "third wave" or so-called Neo-Charismatics. The overall number of followers of these three groups (in millions) is estimated as 79,6 in North America, 37,5 in Europe, 141,4 in South America, 126 in Africa, 134,8 in Asia and 4,2 in Oceania. Since 1947 there has been *The World Federa-*

⁴ Robert Mapes Anderson (2005, 7029) states that "Pentecostalism was brought to Bulgaria, Romania and Russia in the early twenties of the past century by Ivan E. Voronaev, founder of the First Russian Pentecostal Church in New York in 1919."

⁵ The greatest Pentecostal local church communion in the world is in South Korea. It is Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul; it has more than 800,000 members; it has its own state-acknowledged university and publishes its daily paper selling million copies.

tion of Pentecostal Churches as a common world network of Pentecostal churches.

Already an extensive literature has been collected about the activities of the most populous component within the evangelistic booming in the world with hundreds of millions of followers from virtually every world region (Anderson 2004; Kortzen 2001; Cox 1995; Martin 1990; 2002; Nazo 2006; Hunt 2003). Moreover, the demographic center that all the Pentecostals gravitate toward has shifted from the Western countries to Africa, Latin America and some parts of Asia. More and more of South Korean and Latin American Christian missionaries are in Africa as well as African Christians who re-evangelize Western Europe and North America (Бејеп 2010). "Christians in Africa, in 1900, made up only one tenth of the population while today they form 46%... Among the ten most populous Christian states are only three European countries – a century ago there were nine. Nigeria and former Zaire are on the ninth and tenth place while in China there are more Christians than in the united Germany. Data about population growth suggest that, in 2050, on the list of the ten most populous Christian countries there will be not a single European state – the place of Germany and Russia will be taken by Uganda and Ethiopia (Ђирјаковић 2011, 62-3)."

The leading experts on the evangelical boom are drawing attention to its *organizational simplicity* that comprises: *easy carrying* (it is focused on the contents rather than the places of worship), *transmission* (converts themselves take up the role of evangelizers) and *accessibility* (informal atmosphere, emotionally harmonious community and individual acts of the Holy Spirit) (Nazo 2006).⁶

Pentecostalism in Serbia

A married couple, Franjo and Žužana Racz, baptized in the Holy Spirit in Beška (Croatia) moved, in 1936, to Subotica and brought with them a whiff of Pentecostalism („malokršteni“ or

⁶ On theological and cultural causes of Roma Protestantization in Serbia in Todorović 2012b, 2013, 2014a.

baptized infant). The movement spread to Zrenjanin and other cities in Vojvodina and finally to Zemun and Belgrade.⁷ On the eve of the Second World War there were more than 20 Pentecostal communities and groups divided among German, Hungarian and Serbian population (Бјелajaц 2010, 161).

The postwar period was characterized by almost dying away of the German speaking population due to its moving out together with the German army, expulsions and forcing people into military and labor camps. One name stands out, that of Dragutin Volf, an influential preacher in Novi Sad's Church, who was the President of the Pentecostal Assembly for many years. In the fifties, after an initiative launched to unite the Infant-baptizing Church, the Adult-baptizing Church and the Footwashing Spiritual Church, the Christ's Spiritual Church in FNRJ (the Federation of the People's Republic of Yugoslavia) was officially registered with the authorities; it was later renamed into the Association of Christ Spiritual Churches. Its poor hierarchical structure, along with endless rivalry of charismatic leaders, caused new divisions and spilling-over of the members in the following decades.

In the fifties of the twentieth century a church was founded in Karanovac while in the sixties established were communities in Lebane and Leskovac; renewed were activities in Kruševac otherwise initiated in 1942 when Smilja Beljin married Jovan Martić (Бјелajaц 2010, 175). After 1963, groups were formed in Vojlovica near Pančevo, Bela Crkva, Plandište, Pančevo, Kragujevac (1968) and Sombor (1966). The first Pentecostal Church in Kosovo started its activities in 1985 (Бјелajaц 2003; Kuzmič 2007, 228).

On the eve of the breakup of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), in the late 1989, at the church synod of Christ Pentecostal Church and Christ Spiritual Evangelical Church in Belgrade, it was decided that the official name of the church should be Evangelical church in SFRY which, as it was

⁷ Arapović (2003, 109) mentions how one of the most important representatives of the Croatian Pentecostal movement, Petar Dautermann, between 1938 and 1944, passionately evangelized between Novi Sad and Belgrade thus contributing to the foundation of the first Pentecostal church of Adult-baptizing in 1932 in the capital of Serbia.

soon found out, was not sufficient for establishing so much sought-for unity. In the nineties, the first Neo-Pentecostal (Charismatic) communities also started their activities (Calvary Chapel, Community of Faith, Addiction Treatment Center Crossroads, Christian Community "New Horizon"). Finally, different Pentecostal churches in Serbia changed their name, in 1998, into Protestant Evangelical Churches (PEC). Today their number is estimated to be between seven and eight thousand.

Pentecostals in Southeastern Serbia

A small number of believers in the area of Lebane held their original meetings in the village of Šumane, half-way between Lebane and Gornji Vranovac in a modest village house of Slobodan Stanković.⁸ Impassioned villagers, orchestrated by the State Security forces, on two occasions demolished the pulpit and forced the believers to move to Lebane, to the home of Vera Randelović, born Stanković. At the time two additional church premises were added, while in the early eighties another separate building was erected at 16 Pane Đukića Street; it is still today the place of common Sunday church service of Serbs and Roma (Roma in a greater number).

The first evangelical Christians in Leskovac, apart from Vera Davidović, were the married couple Mitković, Ćirilo and Miroslava. Ćirilo later becoming the first pastor in Leskovac, and as he grew old, he retreated to the service in Lebane, while in 1976 ordained for pastor was Miodrag Stanković. In 1964, a building was purchased at 22 Maksima Gorkog Street while an old pre-war villa was also acquired in the early 1980s, which was the family home of the trader Dimitrijević, at number 21. The old building at number 22 had served for Roma religious service before a tent was set up in the "Slavko Zlatanović" quarter, a dona-

⁸ Precious facts about the beginnings of the religious organizing in Southeastern Serbia were given, in a special interview, by Stefan Stanković, a younger son of the founder of Pentecostalism Miodrag-Mija Stanković (Mija's sudden death on February, 24, 2009, just before the scheduled interview in Leskovac deprived us of many authentic evidence about what the preaching of the Biblical doctrine looked like almost half a century ago).

tion from the French Roma Sinti, well known across Europe as the “Church under the Tent”. In 2005, the church was divided into the Protestant Evangelical Church “Community of Roma” and the Spiritual Centre of the Evangelical Church “Light”. Since 2007 the Chinese believers have also started to hold their religious services at the “Light”.

It is a multifunctional center, equipped for proper responses to various needs of the believing population. There is a refectory and a room for daily recreation, a sleeping room with a dozen beds for guests, radio station “Šalom Romalen” for broadcasting programs of spiritual character and a meeting room.

The germ for activities of the Holy Spirit in Niš was an effort invested by Miodrag Stanković from the early seventies of the twentieth century into a sort of parallel support to reinforcement of Niš, Leskovac and Kruševac communities. Another also modest in its contribution was an attempt by pastor Goran Maksimović from the first half of the last decade of the twentieth century. Established formally was the Evangelical Church “Good News” in 1996 while the building at 82 Episkopska Street it got into its ownership not earlier than 2005. The core of the believers at the services was initially made up of some thirty of former students – today the community has about forty baptized believers, mainly Serbs.

Roma Pentecostals in Southeastern Serbia⁹

In Serbia, likewise, the transformation of the Roma minority religious-confessional status in the majority religions into the majority presence in the minority religions and religious communities is the most evident in the example of Evangelical Pentecostalism (Đorđević 2005).

In Leskovac, the first Roma family that have received Christ was that of the Roma woman Sevda, a servant in the household of Ćirilo Mitković. Back in the sixties of the past century Mitković was a Pentecostal pastor. A rare picture was it,

⁹ More detailed in: Тодоровић 2012а.

even for today, let alone for that time: Serbs and Roma at the same table having a Sunday lunch; this led Sevda to the lasting decision to permeate her own life with faith and prayer and with her own impeccable behavior interest her numerous compatriots in a new Christian teaching (Тодоровић 2011а).

Yet, more than the Biblical morals, drawn to Pentecostalism were Roma by the *prayers for health* of Miodrag Stanković when he, in the mid-seventies of the past century, took up the leadership of services and church in Leskovac. Even he himself, as a young pastor, at one point exhausted with sickness, was always ready to respond to Roma' needs, physical or spiritual, individual or familial.¹⁰ All over *mahalas* in Leskovac it was widely rumored that "the Church is healing the sick," that is, that the elders' devout prayers for healing were more efficient than official medicine. The elders themselves, however, interpreted all this more like God's response to the believers: children to the infertile, a male heir to the family, cleansing of tumors and growths on the body and the like. In any case, groups of Roma from the city quarters of Podvorac, Sat-mala and new "Slavko Zlatanović" settlement crowded on Sundays before the building at 22 Maksima Gorkog Street (picture 1) and made the authorities in the Church launch a "mission in the mission," that is, formation of a separate "Community of Roma". This Community later brought forth many others in its immediate surroundings, urban and rural.

As already noted, an important year in the religious life of the Roma Pentecostals in the city on the Dubočica River (Leskovac) is that of 2005, when a third of the believers, headed by their leaders, Šerif Bakić and Bojan Ristović, came back under the wings of the Serbian community "Light", while the others went on being represented by Selim Alijević. This split directly caused separate formation of new communities under the auspices of the Spiritual Centre of the Evangelical Church "Light" and the Protestant Evangelical Church "Community of Roma" (Kurtić 2003, 2008).

¹⁰ Consult authentic testimonies of Miodrag Stanković, published in Stanković 2007, as well as the Starešinstvo Protestantske evanđeoske crkve (Elders of the Protestant Evangelical Church) 2007.

The "Community of Roma" is more agile in its missionary work. Small prayer groups and mission stations can be also found in Prokuplje, Surdulica, Vladičin Han, Bela Palanka, Pirot, Bujanovac as well as in Žitni Potok, Razgojna and Pečenjevac, including Dubovo near Bojnik. Gatherings are most often in some believer's home, periodically visited by the elders from Leskovac. In Prokuplje the believers are led by Marjan Stanković, second year student of the Biblical School, that the Leskovac headquarters seriously counts upon in his future evangelistic work.

Depending on the modest financial means and resourcefulness of the believers themselves on the spot, some communities started to work either in rented or their own facilities. Thus, for instance, close to Leskovac is Bošnjace where, in the Roma *mahala* in the centre, there is a rather small building enabled, with the basic construction efforts, for gatherings of some thirty Roma led by Nenad Durmiširević.

Special attention is devoted to contacts with brothers and sisters in neighboring Vranje which already started in the early nineties of the twentieth century. The elders, Dalibor Jašarević and Nenad Bektašević, are at the disposal of the converted to Christ while the premises were voluntarily given over by Jovica Jašarević. They have also initiated a Church site at: <http://romsk-acrkva.com>.

The religious needs of some fifty Roma from eight kilometers far away Vranjska Banja are also fulfilled. Basically, is equipped for religious service an attic of the family home of Kadir Asanović (picture 2).

In Vranje and Vranjska Banja are also active branches of Leskovac Spiritual Centre of the Evangelical Church "Light." In the old city core, in Upper Čaršija, only a few dozen meters from the monument to Bakija Bakić, father of the Roma trumpet, in a rented room on the ground floor of a family building some thirty Roma Pentecostals organize their gatherings (picture 3).

Also rented is a room in Vranjska Banja to which come to listen to sermons and praise God some twenty believers.

As a separate community, in a *mahala* at the Jewish cemetery in 11 Mramorska Street, the Protestant Evangelical Church, the Spiritual Centre "Community of Roma," functions with

around thirty baptized believers and around one hundred sympathizers (picture 4). Elder Rama Jašarević, with his wife and children, lives in a house near the Church; he does not come from Niš originally; he has moved from Leskovac in order to conduct his mission among his compatriots in the city upon the Nišava River (Niš).

Protestant Evangelical Church “Community of Roma” in Leskovac

21st of September 1986 is a historical date for Evangelical Pentecostalism in Serbia. On that day, in Leskovac, sanctified are objects of the Spiritual Centre of the Evangelical Church “Light” in Maksima Gorkog Street; likewise, the first “Community of Roma” in the former Yugoslavia was opened (Starešinstvo Protestantske evanđeoske crkve 2007). One church but two communities in two objects: Serbian at number 21 while Roma at number 22.

Many have, in those days, estimated as a risky step the division of religious service into Serbian and Roma languages afraid of the judgment for division in Christ of two nations. However, there are, amongst them, those who were firmly convinced that Roma deserve to express their achieved spiritual freedom fully in accord with their own temperament. Like in other important living situations, they would utterly give themselves to the Church events. Their articulation of whatever was felt in their souls was not the same as with their Serbian brothers: faster, louder and noisier was their singing; they prayed more passionately; they stood clapping their hands; they raised their hands as well as eyes toward the ceiling. The verses copied from the Anglo-Saxon hymn books were composed in accordance with the well-known Roma music; their lyrics were a specific experience of God in their own language. Although they still lacked their own state, they became fully equal members of the Kingdom of God. They got their own church and a completely new identity. In a word – they praised God in their own Roma way!

After completing two year-spiritual education in the International Bible Training Institute in Burgess Hill in England, Miodrag Mija Stanković and his sons, Stanko and Stefan, in 1991 were joined, as elder and then as the first Roma pastor young and promising Selim Alijević (Kurtić 2003). In the early two-thousands ordained as elders are Šerif Bakić and Bojan Rasimović. The team work has given immeasurable contribution to active spread of the Gospels among Leskovac Roma. In the times to come, the number of the baptized believers has exceeded thousand along with at least as many friends of the Church and occasional visitors.

Children, teenager and youth lessons, in addition to later sisters' ones, enabled the whole generation of new believers, enthusiastic enough to tirelessly call people, in the narrow and overcrowded alleys in the *mahalas*, to come, at different terms, to Sunday religious services since not all of them possibly could be contained in such a small space. The problem was in the main resolved on April 1, 2001, when a big blue-white tent¹¹ was set up (25x15 m in size), on the bought parcel at 35 Karađorđeva Street, in the "Slavko Zlatanović" settlement (a yard of the former warehouse of the company "Dva jarana" /"Two Pals"/) (picture 5).

Though the registration of religious gatherings at a new address was properly done at the respective institutions, this was not the whole story. Very frequent objections on the part of the neighbors of Serbian nationality at the entrance of the street as well as a wider area because of alleged noise and improper behavior culminated in the resolution brought by the communal authorities ordering the tent to be disassembled or torn down. The elders responded wisely by informing all available printed and electronic media about violation of the civic and religious freedoms and by forming a "living shield" before the object formed of over a thousand young and old believers along with the youngest children. A sermon was held in the open; there was much singing to God and praying to Christ. The Presi-

¹¹ Leskovac Roma are by no means an exclusive case. Unable to accommodate thousands of new believers who come to hear sermons about "God on earth", Brazilian pastors are all the time forced to rent big blue-white circus tents (Ђирјковић 2005, 66).

dent of Leskovac Municipality did not want to risk his public reputation, so that a compromise was made to calm down the passions and provide for the tent survival (Kurtić 2008). At the same time, the premises at 15 Maksima Gorkog Street were turned into a humanitarian storage, that is, the seat of the Charity Society "Oasis".

Just as one storm died down, another started. Due to the opposed views regarding the future church organization – though church indiscipline was also mentioned – in the early 2005 a split occurred within the so far united "Community of Roma". Under the same name and leadership of pastor Selim Alijević, member of the Main Elders and coordinator of the Roma communities of the Protestant Evangelical Church in the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia (SRY), a larger group of Roma remained while a smaller group, headed by Roma elders Šerif Bakić and Bojan Rasimović opted for, or rather, returned to its original nest - Spiritual Centre "Light" and common religious service with Serbs at 21 Maksima Gorkog Street. Regarding its structure, the "Light" defined itself as an independent church commune in the South of Serbia, independent of Belgrade.

Confidence was shaken of a quite numerous population of believers. Some of them suddenly decided to stop attending both the communities; in silence and without many words they expressed their dissatisfaction with the reorganization. Moreover, the whole families were also shaken: Father chose Selim unlike son who chose Šerif thus heating up tensions within the family circle. Assistant to Selim Alijević, Goran Saitović, confirms that today's community gathers together some three hundred of baptized believers and as many friends (this proportion also stands for the Center "Light").¹²

The Church in the new settlement has continued to develop. In addition to the tent, gradually are repaired the existing buildings of firm material for performing all sorts of activities. Today's existing complex includes an administrative office, a

¹² While conducting planned interviews, I could conclude, from the talks I had with common believers from both the communities, that there is general mood for re-establishing the previous unity. It seems it is upon the Church elders to find a practical way of doing it for the benefit of all.

classroom with the school equipment for work with the young ones, a kitchen for refreshments and snacks, recreational facilities and a radio station.

The main part of the Church activities in the “Community of Roma” is done in the Roma language, from regular religious service to religious training with the youngest ones. If non-Roma come as guests to the service, it is an unwritten rule that the pastor should preach in Serbian. An hour before the habitual schedule for religious service – on Wednesdays and Sundays from 6 pm – the first believers come to a spacious churchyard; those from far away *mahalas* or places gravitating to them, as well as older and people with motion sickness have a rented van at their disposal. The attendance is better on weekends, as a rule, before the coldest season when Roma are returning from autumn seasonal jobs all over Serbia to spend the winter in their homes. At the entrance of the Church there are monitors and deacons, servers responsible for organizing and conducting church rituals: after greeting each member individually, they direct people to the central part of a spacious hall. The inner walls of the tent are covered in wood panels in order to maximally preserve warmth when the snow starts to fall.

Uninformed and unprepared observers are liable to face an unusual scene while the last arrangements are being made on the stage: some believers take turns in loud emotional expressions of prayers to God before other brothers and sisters. The padded wooden benches are mainly taken by women both older ones, hunched-backed and with head coverings, as well as younger ones, with no scarves, very often with babies in their arms or holding the hands of their several years old children. Their own place at one end is reserved for children attending primary and high schools. The clothes the believers wear is far from the glitter and quality of the attendants of the religious services with Adventists and Jehovah’s Witnesses; they are not new, yet they are clean and tidy. The first central row, just opposite to the raised stage with a sound system and musical instruments, is usually intended for guests and leaders. Evident attention is devoted to the members of musical accompaniment, i.e., keyboards, goblet drum, guitar and bass guitar, with a separate

microphone for accompanying vocals of singers. An especially appointed young man is to deal with a laptop; on a stretched canvas on the wall he keeps on changing lyrics and biblical quotations otherwise mentioned in the pastor's sermons and prayers – this is to serve all those who have not been well acquainted with the Holy Scripture.

One or two songs of pious contents are enough to establish the oneness of spirit of those in the hall before pastor Selim Alijević, with a microphone in his hand, offers words of welcome and invites, with his opening prayer, all the present to join a common address to Christ, so-called *praise of God*. What follows is a set of songs of recognizably Christian contents in the harmonies of Roma music. Enchanted, with, as a rule, their eyes closed, the believers express the pouring of the Holy Spirit; some of them are sitting; many are standing up; some hands are in the air while some other people have folded their arms across the chest or let them hang loosely; some voices are thundering while others can hardly be heard uttering verses; some faces are all in tears streaming down both cheeks or with faces twisted into pain grimaces; some others are perfectly calm. Everything is subordinated to the personal experience sustained by blasting music powerfully resounding from the loudspeakers. On special occasions comes a church choir thus completing, together with the musicians, the team for praising God. Already a few CDs with the Roma spiritual music have been recorded and freely distributed.

After the ritual of praise, the believers listen to a sermon from the Bible with a clear moral message. The pastor is reading verses in Serbian though he clarifies and elaborates them in Roma. What follows is another set of songs and, before the ending of the evening service, there are prayers for the needs of the believers. In a murmuring crowd going out into the night one can spot one or two mothers with babies in their arms or some wretched accompanied person asking the pastor to say words of blessing directly to him.

A few times a year, regularly on the Day of Pentecost, baptized are new members from Leskovac and smaller places in which the Church has its believers.

The pastor is aided, in his work, by the Church Board appointed once a year. It is made up of distinguished Church representatives who confirm, by indicating the changes in habits, a beneficial effect of Christ on them. Further functioning of the assigned tasks is also contributed by numerous other assistants: religious training instructors, filing clerks on duty, sister leaders, prayer coordinators, leaders of charity work, etc.

Since 2009, there has been a kindergarten functioning in the Church; together with its Sunday school it plays a decisive role in teaching the youngest moral and spiritual values. There is also a four-term DVD Biblical School whose conception is to inform about the foundations of faith; the completion of this school implies the acquisition of diploma and recommendations for further religious improvement. Since 2005 the radio program of local range broadcast Radio Emanuel at 98,2 megahertz; it transmits sermons alive, readings from the Bible and spiritual music in the Roma language. In the Union Hall in Leskovac it has already become a tradition in the last few years to organize celebrations devoted to Christmas and Easter along with the performances of youth choir, amateur drama groups and children groups. Permanent Internet page is formed at: <http://zajednicaroma.com/php/show.php>.

Present State and Perspectives of Roma Pentecostalism in Southeastern Serbia

After their initial mutual misunderstandings and oppositions, *Roma evangelical pastors have become synonyms for desirable partners of the municipal authorities in solving piled up problems of Roma*. The reasons for this are their ensuring of an intense cooperation with "non-Roma" based on their common interests: lowering of the crime rate, improvement of family relationships, a new attitude toward the sphere of work and production and the like. By their caretaking and serving among the believers, still, the ordained leaders advocate general religious values identical to the secular ones: justice, freedom, truth, rule of law, and struggle against rising discrimination.

Neither do Non-Roma and Roma leaders of evangelical Christians refuse to get involved in politics.¹³ With their responses they make it clear they do not like either leftist or rightist deputy mandates since the mission of the Church and the messages from the pulpit are far beyond narrow-mindedness and selfishness of the games of political rivalry. How to be cautious they also learnt from the experience they gained so far, mostly negative, with the actors of Serbian parliamentarism though the believers are not prohibited to have their votes at elections. Yet, they do care to have, in the commissions that make decisions about the issues of vital city functioning (communal and traffic problems, development plans, social programs, culture and education), the persons with outstanding moral integrity. Two reasons are for this. People who have received Christ in their lives and who whole-heartedly love God would suppress corruption, murky dealings, lies, thefts and cheatings; they would use their moral integrity to affect others to bring themselves to decency in accordance with the basic Christian principles. At the same time, they could present, to relevant city authorities and bodies, all the problems of the Roma people in the local community thus contributing to their welfare.

Pentecostal Spiritual Centre "Light" in Leskovac has been patiently, for many years, in cooperation with city structures, planning and projecting the construction of a multi-functional object at three and a half hectares in the "Slavko Zlatanović" settlement-*mahala* that is to meet the needs of spiritual and cultural life of Roma as well as other citizens of Leskovac. Roma pastor, Selim Alijević has confirmed to us that the Protestant Evangelical Church "Community of Roma" in Leskovac is getting ready to launch an initiative for founding an *alliance of Roma churches*. The idea is to gather together under one roof all the evangelical churches representing Roma converts to Christianity, so that they could sustain each other in their missionary work.

Thus, the religious communities attain, with their activism, two goals, namely, they foster desired public political cohe-

¹³ A more comprehensive account of the achievements of political activism among Roma Pentecostals in Southeastern Serbia in Тодоровић 2014б.

sion and credibility of Roma representatives and they ensure lasting support of a wider society. For now, domestic evangelists should not be expected to appear in the roles of founders or sponsors of political movements or parties; a greater likelihood is the appearance of Roma Pentecostals in the role of creators of “public role” of evangelical Christianity in their respective local neighborhoods. The most typical are religious institutions that serve for other purposes apart from religious ones with the intention to represent and involve the Christianity of the “re-born” into the common cultural space.

Time will show whether the Pentecostal religious leaders in Serbia will undertake open political awakening of Roma people and thus widen the range of their activities that would serve as guides to new believers in making their choices on the religious market. *For the time being, this is not the case yet.*

Photos:



Picture 1: Spiritual Centre of the Evangelical Church “Light” in Leskovac (May 2007)



Picture 2: Sub-branch of the Protestant Evangelical Church "Community of Roma" in Vranjska banja (February 2009)



Picture 3: Sub-branch of the Spiritual Centre of the Evangelical Church "Light" in Vranje (March 2009)



Picture 4: Protestant Evangelical Church "Community of Roma" in Niš (March 2009)



Picture 5: Today's Outlook of the Church under the Tent" in Leskovac (February 2009)

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