

“Peace Is Not Passive”: Russell M. Nelson’s Radical Call to Peacemaking

By [Alex Jensen](#) and [AnnMarie Sandridge](#)

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How can peacemaking prevail amid rage? When peace is chosen with faith in God, beauty from ashes, and outreach.

A few weeks before his death, President Russel M. Nelson of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints published an editorial in [TIME](#) magazine. In it, he wrote: “Imagine how different our world could be if more of us were peacemakers—building bridges of understanding rather than walls of prejudice—especially with those who may see the world differently than we do.” Sadly, much of the world is not heeding this call. Mass shootings, arson, politically motivated murder, war, and genocide are all too common. Our world is full of turmoil and conflict. But it doesn’t have to be this way. As President Nelson taught in April 2023,

Contention reinforces the false notion that confrontation is the way to resolve differences; but it never is. Contention is a choice. Peacemaking is a choice. You have your agency to choose contention or reconciliation. I urge you to *choose* to be a peacemaker, now and always.

As we mourn his passing, we want to reflect on these teachings and what it means to be a peacemaker. The word itself is interesting. “Peace” can mean more than an absence of conflict; it can also mean a state of harmony, wholeness, and stillness. The word President Nelson emphasizes is not peace-experiencer, peace-taker, or peace-enjoyer. The word is *peacemaker*. A maker is someone who uses effort and intention to create, to build.

Lessons from Bosnia & Herzegovina

The last two years, Brigham Young University’s School of Family Life hosted a five-week study abroad program in central southern Europe. One thing the program covers is how war and trauma impact human development. The two of us had the privilege of attending as a co-director (Alex Jensen) and as a student (AnnMarie Sandridge). The program is life-changing: faculty and students leave with a deeper connection to the Savior and an increased ability to see the suffering of others through Christ’s eyes.

As part of the program, we spent nearly two weeks in Sarajevo, the capital city of Bosnia & Herzegovina. Sarajevo is a beautiful city, nestled in a little valley surrounded by large green mountains. In 1984, those mountains were the host to the Olympic Games. During the Sarajevo Olympic Games, the citizens played a particularly important role in modeling international unity. Sarajevo did not have enough accommodation to host all the athletes, press, and tourists. In response, thousands of local citizens opened their homes to provide places for people to eat, sleep, and stay. In that moment, the city of Sarajevo was a beacon of making peace.

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Eight years after hosting the Olympics, the city of Sarajevo became a symbol of the consequences of hate, intolerance, and contention. [In March 1992](#), the Republic of

Bosnia & Herzegovina declared independence from the fragmenting country of Yugoslavia. The move to independence brought simmering religious and ethnic tensions to the surface. The country fell into a brutal civil war, and the city of Sarajevo was put under siege for nearly 3 years and 11 months. More than 11,000 people would die in this city alone. Hundreds of thousands would frequently suffer without running water, electricity, heat, and sufficient food.



The abandoned Olympic bobsled track in the mountains above Sarajevo

In addition to the millions of bullets, an estimated 500,000 grenades, mortars, and bombs were fired into the city from the surrounding mountains over the course of the siege, bringing terror, death, and destruction. In cities surrounding Sarajevo, Bosnian Muslims were raped, tortured, and killed in a cultural and ethnic genocide. Across the country, approximately 100,000 people were killed during the Bosnian war and genocide, resulting in some of the worst atrocities committed in Europe since World War II.

Given the experiences the people in the city endured, you would expect to find a people full of hatred and a desire for vengeance. Undoubtedly, some feel this way, but many do not. Our group spent time with many people who, despite going through the horrors of the siege, have become peacemakers. Their examples provide shining examples of President Nelson's teachings. Below, we share three specific ways the people of Sarajevo taught us about being peacemakers.

Let God Prevail

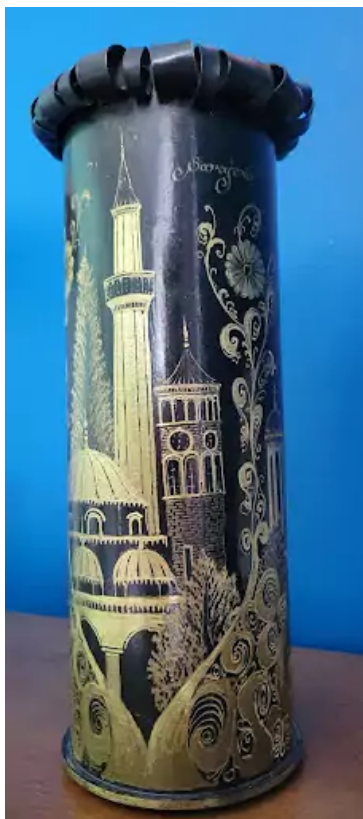
First, the people of Sarajevo taught us the importance of worshipping God sincerely and [letting God prevail](#) in their lives. Nearly half of the population of Bosnia & Herzegovina is Muslim. During our time in Sarajevo, we visited many mosques, including attending the call to prayers and visiting with worshippers following the prayers.

A consistent theme we heard was that before the war, God was not present in their lives. During the conflict, however, they learned to lean on God—to actively worship Him, and let Him prevail. In turning to God, they connected with peace that could exist regardless of the circumstances around them. Through God, they found healing and stillness. It was inspiring to hear from many who have maintained that faith after the war and continue to pursue a sincere worship of God. [President Nelson](#) expounded this principle by emphasizing “the joy we feel has little to do with the circumstances of our lives and everything to do with the focus of our lives.” Peacemaking happens as we sincerely worship and let God prevail.

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Beauty for Ashes

The second lesson we learned was to choose to see the good in bad situations – in other words, to see the ways God can make beauty from ashes and give the oil of joy from mourning (Isaiah 61:3). A small street in Sarajevo has been home to generations of coppersmiths. These smiths produce beautiful tableware, drinkware, spice grinders, and other decorative items. During and immediately after the siege, copper was hard to source. It made it hard for them to make a living and provide for their families. When the siege ended, the coppersmiths scoured the mountains around the city, collecting the casings from grenades as well as artillery and tank ordnance. They took the casings and made them into exquisite works of art.



*A decorated 105 mm howitzer
shell casing*

One coppersmith told us that it brought him peace. He was able to provide for his family because he saw the beauty in things that were designed for killing. Despite being wounded in the siege and losing several friends, he smiles when he says, “I am a happy man. I have my family, I have enough, and we are at peace.” The coppersmiths taught us to see the beauty in everything around us, even the ashes.

Peace is not Passive

The last and perhaps most important lesson the people of Sarajevo taught us was that peace is not passive. We spent time with multiple men who were sent to fight on the front lines of the siege as teenagers or young adults. In each instance, the front line was only one, two, or three miles from their homes. They were sent off with little to no training, and in many cases, unarmed. The unarmed soldiers carved sticks into the rough shape of a weapon to appear armed. Each man lost friends and family in the fighting.

One man told us that following the war, he was bitter and angry. His thirst for vengeance was destroying him from within. In this state, he came across an

organization that brought veterans of the war together—veterans from each side of the conflict. People would come share their stories, listen, and learn from one another—regardless of the social divisions that may have contributed to the war. At first, it was painful and even angering, but he kept attending. At one point, he realized, “these people are just like me.” Today, he calls some of them his friends.

He stressed to our group, “Peace is not passive.” If we want peace within ourselves and peace in our communities, we have to get outside of ourselves and engage with others — especially those who are different from us. It is easy to see others as enemies when we do not understand them. When we are willing to be with others and sincerely listen to them, we come to understand them more as the Savior does and to love them as He does.

These men modeled for us the truth taught by Nephi, the Lord “inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile” (2 Nephi, 26:33). If God invites all to come unto him, perhaps like these men from Sarajevo, we should not turn our hearts away from those different from ourselves: the rich, the poor, the conservative, the liberal, the heterosexual, the homosexual, the single, the married, the able bodied, the disabled, the citizen, the immigrant, the friend, the enemy—the children of God.

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As we honor the life and passing of Russell M. Nelson, we hope that we can heed his call to be more like the Savior Jesus Christ and work toward becoming peacemakers. We are grateful for the people of Sarajevo who opened their hearts to us and shared their stories of making peace. May we each learn to turn to God and worship Him more fully, see the beauty in the ashes, and actively make peace by connecting on a personal level with those who are different from ourselves.

About the authors

Alex Jensen

Alex Jensen is a professor in the School of Family Life at Brigham Young University. His research focuses on sibling relationships in the context of disabilities and autism. In 2021 he and his family lived six hours north of Sarajevo when he was a visiting faculty member at the University of Zagreb.

AnnMarie Sandridge

AnnMarie Sandridge is a first-year master's student in BYU's Marriage, Family, and Human Development program. Her research explores sibling relationships and supporting individuals with disabilities. She hopes to pursue a PhD after her master's. Since attending BYU's study abroad in 2024, Sarajevo has held a special place in her heart.