

It does not take long to realize that there is something different about Danijel Mrsic's church. All you have to do is meet some of the members and staff.

"This is Ivan," Mrsic, a pastor, says as he puts his hand on the shoulder of a smiling man in the colors of the Croatian national soccer team. "He used to be addicted to drugs." All around the church, the story is the same – in the secretary's office, in the sanctuary where all is becoming ready for a Good Friday service, the introductions contain the words "former drug addict" almost as an afterthought.

In fact, not all of the people who gather in this newly constructed, peach-colored building near downtown Split are addicts who have become clean. Mrsic estimates the number of those at 35-40 percent. But since Mrsic and his wife, Eva, moved to Split in 1991, drug rehabilitation has been one of their main goals.

"We had heard that Split at that time. . . was the second city in Europe concerning the percentage of drug addicts after Amsterdam," said Eva. "When we came, we started to see that that was a reality. We didn't have a [rehabilitation] center then, and what we offered was just our friendship and contact."

They continued in this ministry until, because of the escalation of the war in former Yugoslavia, they turned their attention mostly to working with the refugees that came pouring to the coast from the eastern part of the country. From 1993 to 1998, much of the work they did was with refugees. But helping drug addicts get back on their feet was never far from their minds.

In the mid-'90s, a rehabilitation program in Spain planned to open a facility in Croatia, and the Mrsices encouraged them to come to Split. Since then, Eva said, at least 2000 young people from Split and its environs have gone through the drug rehabilitation program.

While Danijel and Eva Mrsic and their congregation are not directly involved in the drug rehabilitation facility, they now run prevention programs and reentry programs, such as a painter's workshop, so that former drug addicts can have a fresh start.

One prevention program that they hope to open in the future is a camp for young people from all countries in former Yugoslavia. 25 million people live in those countries, and there is not a large Christian camp to serve them, to give them a respite from the pressures of the world. "There are not many alternative activities for young people," Eva said. "And that's why many are in drugs, and many complain of being bored. Even if it's a beautiful country, and you see the sea. . . many of them cannot study, cannot have careers. Even if they have a career or are good professionals they cannot earn money.

"And all of our friends, pastors and ministers and Christians all around Croatia and all around the ex-republics of Yugoslavia. . . are up for that. They say yes, we need that."

As the congregation in this church gathers to reflect on Good Friday, they look forward to celebrating new life on Easter. And reflecting on Croatia and on the people of Croatia – a beautiful country ravaged by war, a too-often hopeless people who have turned to drugs so they can leave reality behind – it is not difficult to think that new life can happen here.