

CZECH PROTESTANTS PROPOSE REFORMS

By Paul Bock

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During a visit to Czechoslovakia in October, 1989, I had the opportunity to talk with several pastors and church leaders about the current situation, particularly as it affects Protestants. My principal contacts were with people from the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren (ECCB), the product of a merger in 1918 of Lutheran and Reformed churches in Bohemia and Moravia. Its present moderator is the Rev. Dr. Josef Hromadka, a distant relative of the theologian of the same name who died in 1971.

Many Czechs have been hopeful that the Eastern European political reform movements would soon have an effect on their country. On the one hand, they do see some signs of change. On the other hand, they expect that it will take some time before a significant reforms take place.

Within the ECCB there are tensions which reflect the conflicts within the whole society. Church leaders at times accommodate themselves to government wishes in order to reduce oppression. But within the church there are voices which call for a direct and open opposition to government violations of human rights.

In the time of the Prague Spring (1968) members of this church were active supporters of "socialism with a human face," and in the early years of "normalization" the church made some courageous critical statements. As a result, it suffered more than some others in the 1970s. Many pastors lost their necessary state-issued preaching licenses. A few got them back, but today there are still 15 preachers forbidden to preach.

In the late seventies both the church leaders and the theological faculty tended to accommodate themselves to the countless laws and regulations concerning the church, and they became targets of sharp criticism by some theological students and by a group of activists clergy. The most critical were the clergy who had lost their licenses. At times they felt that the church leadership was distancing itself from the rather than supporting them. Some of these clergy were signers of Charter 77. The government put great pressure on the church leaders to disown the charter and its signers, and, to a large extent, they did.

In the 1980s the "dissident" clergy and other activists have continued to prod the church leadership and in recent years it did take more courageous actions. In 1983 the synod

issued a statement on nuclear disarmament and also called for alternative service for conscientious objectors.

Prior to the 25th synod meeting in 1987, a challenging letter was presented to the church by the activist wing of the church asking the synod to endorse a plan for open discussion of church-state relations in the church press and to appoint a commission to present church views to the government as it revises its constitution. The synod did not take direct action but passed a recommendation to the Synodical Council regarding the possible establishment of a commission. In the synod meeting other requests were made for public statements on issues such as amnesty for political prisoners, the right to have worship services in old folks homes, a cessation of punishment for church people, provision of alternative service for conscientious objectors, and a dialogue with the state on church-state relations. These, too, were passed on to the Synodical Council.

The Synodical Council did appoint a commission, and in 1989 it completed a list of recommendations for a revised state constitution and presented it to the government. The recommendations were published in full in the church press and in abbreviated form in the official Communist Party newspaper Rude Pravo. State officials showed a willingness to listen. The fact that the church was courageous enough to present these recommendations and that the state was willing to listen is one of the hopeful signs of the times.

Following are the church's recommendations stated in a slightly abbreviated form:

Each person has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This includes private and communal expressions of faith and the right to teach religion.

No pressure should be exerted upon people that would hinder freedom of expression.

One's religious faith should not be a reason for denying a person the right to education or the right to engage in any occupation or profession.

Religious communities should be free to assemble and to engage in activities useful to society, such as care for the old, sick and handicapped people.

Inflaming hostilities based on religious faith or atheism should be forbidden.

Religious faith should not be an obstacle to carrying out civic obligations; where there is conflict, alternative service should be provided, particularly for conscientious objectors to military service.

All citizens should be treated equally regardless of sex, nationality, religion, or political persuasion.

Capital punishment should be abolished.

All citizens should have the right to choose their professions.

All cultural policy should be in harmony with the development of science and in close relationship with the life and work of people, and should not be based on ideology.

One underlying idea of these recommendations is that religious people should not be treated as second class citizens. They should be treated as equals.

Besides preparing these recommendations for the new constitution, the church leaders also sent proposals to a legislative committee working on a revision of the penal code. They call for elimination of laws pertaining to the supervision of churches and to the misuse of religious functions and for the addition of laws protecting people whose freedom of conscience is denied and who are frequently punished more than once for the same offense, such as refusal to serve in the armed forces.

Besides making these proposals to the state the ECCB is facing an issue of church-state relations which has been raised by Roman Catholics. A petition written by a Catholic layman, was circulated in Czechoslovakia and was eventually signed by hundreds of thousands of people. It appealed to the state mainly for greater religious liberty but also called for separation of church and state. Protestants, of course, want greater religious liberty, but they are struggling with the latter issue. They are not sure that they can get along without state subsidy, but wish to receive it in the same manner as they did before 1948. Then the state did not pay the pastors directly but turned the money over to the church headquarters which paid the pastors. It was state support without control. This issue was on the agenda for the upcoming synod meeting.

Among the problems that Protestants face are shortages of clergy. This is due to the restriction placed on seminaries regarding enrollment, to the loss of preaching licenses by several pastors, and to the lack of appeal to youth of the profession which is one of the lowest paid in society. In the ECCB 50 out of 250 pastoral positions are vacant. The Slovak Evangelical Church of Augsburg Confession(Lutheran) has been training lay deacons in its seminary in Bratislava to help offset its clergy shortage.

In view of the problems faced by Christians in Czechoslovakia one might expect that the Protestant--Roman Catholic cooperation would be strong. But it is not. When Czech Protestant women sought to gain the cooperation of Roman Catholic women in the preparation of the 1990 World Day of Prayer service they were unsuccessful. The faculties of the seminaries do not meet together. Yet there are examples of cooperation, particularly in regard to Bible publication. A new Czech translation of the Bible has been prepared and is being used by both Protestants and Roman Catholics in Bohemia and Moravia. The same is true of a new Slovak Bible being used in Slovakia.

A striking example of solidarity was a letter sent in July 1988 to the Central Committee of the Communist party. Signed by thirteen Protestant pastors and lay people, it objected to the persecution of the Roman Catholics by the government. It noted that persecution of Roman Catholics had been greater than persecution of Protestants. It called upon the

Central Committee to return a building originally belonging to a Catholic seminary, to allow Catholic religious orders to function freely, and to allow the Catholic church freedom in Christian education and youth work. The signers of the letter were predominantly members of the activist minority in the ECCB.

This activist minority has a close association with Charter 77. Some of its members signed it and paid a high price: they lost their preaching licenses and suffered other deprivations. I asked one of them about the present role of Charter 77. He said that the most important work of that group had been done. It pioneered the way of championing human rights while others were afraid to speak up. It took risks and suffered the consequences as it challenged the government to live up to its agreements at Helsinki. Now, he said, other groups have taken courage and have made their voices heard. There have been petitions signed by many people. There was the Catholic petition for religious liberty and more recently a plea called "A Few Sentences" signed by many prominent citizens calling for democratic reforms and a dialogue with the Communist leadership.

I also asked why Czechoslovakia is now behind Poland and Hungary in democratic reforms. He gave me several reasons. One was the relatively good economic situation in the country. People see the economic chaos in Poland and they don't want that. Another reason is that socialism has deep roots in Czechoslovakia. Still another is the disillusionment resulting from previous reform efforts in the Prague Spring which brought a Warsaw Pact invasion and a ruthless normalization. Still, he said, seeds for reform have been sown and they will bear fruit.

In 1989 the Charter 77 Foundation in Stockholm gave its Kreigel Prize(named after the Czech who refused to sign the document of capitulation in Moscow in 1969) to two Czech clergymen who risked and suffered much by signing Charter 77. They were the Rev. Jan Dus, a Protestant, and Dr. Josef Zverina, a Roman Catholic.

There are some signs in Czechoslovakia of renewed interest in religious faith. According to Dr. Milan Opocensky, a Czech theologian now serving as General Secretary of the Reformed World Alliance, more people are now turning to the church for help in finding the meaning of life. This does not mean that the church membership is growing. The membership decline, which began in 1948, continues. However, there has recently been an increase in participation in the Lord's Supper, according to the Rev. Miroslav Broz, Secretary of the Synodical Council of the ECCB.

During the past four decades the church has become less of a "Volkskirche" and more of a confessing church. People have paid a price for remaining church members. They were treated as second-class citizens. For example, they were by-passed at the time of promotions, denied leadership positions, ruled out of certain professions such as teaching.

It is generally known that the state officials who wrote the constitution and the laws in the late 40's and early 50's assumed that if the church were legally restricted it would not survive more than thirty years. But it has survived and is now even calling for the

elimination of the oppressive laws and for reinstatement of believers as full members of society.

In conversations with pastors and professors in Czechoslovakia one quickly senses the deep influence on them by the noted Czech theologian, the late Josef L. Hromadka, whose 100th birthday was commemorated in 1989 not only in Prague but also in other parts of Europe and the United States. Writing an article on that occasion Dr. Jan M. Lochman, a Czech theologian teaching in Basel, Switzerland, wrote, "In the history of European theology there are few theologians who have influenced the life and thought of their church as much as the Czech Protestant theologian, Josef Hromadka (1889-1969)." As is generally known, Hromadka sought to influence Communism from within, hoping to humanize it. He found his hopes realized in the Prague Spring of 1968 only to have them shattered by the Warsaw Pact invasion. Shortly thereafter he died, a deeply disappointed man. One wishes that he could have lived to see the current developments in Eastern Europe. He firmly believed that the Soviet state cannot be separated from the revolutionary changes of 1917 but that its future would be a synthesis of the revolution and the pre-revolutionary Russian spiritual wealth. Already in 1945 he declared that if the Soviet experiment and the political and social trends of the West could be brought closer together, peace would be saved for several hundred years.

At the time when this article is being written changes are taking place so rapidly in Eastern Europe, especially in East Germany, that one cannot help but wonder if the Czechs were right who thought that it would take some time before changes would take place in their country. All around them reform movements are at work. Only a short time ago East Germany was as hard-line a Communist country as Czechoslovakia. Can Czechoslovakia be far behind?

ADDENDUM

The Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren was having its synod meeting in Prague in November at the time that the demonstrations began. The synod issued a pronouncement denouncing the violence being used against the demonstrators. Due to the turmoil the synod meeting was temporarily adjourned, and was scheduled to resume on January 26 and 27, 1990.

Rev. Josef Hromadka, moderator of the church, has become a Deputy Premier of the federal government. In that capacity he travelled to Rome to talk with the Vatican about appointment of new Catholic bishops for Czechoslovakia. One has already been appointed. Hromadka will continue to be the moderator of the church until new church elections take place in May. Essentially he is on leave.

The government has agreed not to interfere in the internal affairs of the churches. The local offices of state-appointed secretaries for church affairs have been abolished.

Ministers who lost their preaching licenses are eligible now to serve as pastors if congregations call them. Negotiations are under way. However, some are already of retirement age.

Many of the proposals for a new constitution made by the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren are essentially already in effect since religious liberty is guaranteed. The government adopted a proposal presented by the Rev. Josef Hromadka that all laws have to abide by the Helsinki Accords as implemented in the Vienna Concluding Document.