

PERSPECTIVES ON EVANGELICAL CHURCH OF CZECH BRETHREN TODAY

Excerpts of Reports in *Czech Working Group Newsletter* (July 1999)

We begin with remarks by the editor of the Newsletter (produced within the Europe Office of the Presbyterian Church USA) that introduces the writers:

Pavel Smetana, the Synodal Senior of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren (ECCB), was an ecumenical delegate to the 21st General Assembly in Fort Worth, and toured several PC(USA) congregations of Czech origin in the US. The Czech Working Group also assisted in helping ECCB member (and daughter of Czech theologian Josef Hromadka) Alena Zikmundova plan a reunion visit to her alma mater in the US, Wooster College. In August, we welcome Ondrej Stehlik to the Presbyterian Center to work as an International Mission Partner in Residence for a year. Stehlik, a pastor in Prague, currently serves as president of the American Working Group, the Prague counterpart of the CWG.

The ECCB and Mission - by Alena Zikmundová

Our Church is small and we have no traditional missionaries as we have known them for the last two centuries. Yet mission and missionary work (from the word derived from *missere*, to send), does not mean only to send to another land, but to send with a message wherever the call. Our society, just like societies in most historically Christian countries, is becoming more and more secularized. One half of the population is atheistic, many others are interested in something spiritual (of a Far East influence or that of a variety of sects from the West). Especially after the "Velvet Revolution" various sects had a great harvest. What is the "mission" of our Church, how does it spread the message of the Gospel, and in what way does the ECCB witness to her faith in this alienated world?

Mission is a *calling* and each individual is endowed with his or her special gifts; therefore mission in the ECCB has several dimensions. The Advisory Commission for Mission and Evangelization in the ECCB has, over the years, become more evangelically minded. It has prepared courses for lay people to understand the meaning of the Good News and to be prepared to witness Christ among their fellow-citizens or schoolmates through *word and prayer*, and so to

penetrate into indifferent society. Last year, PC(USA) minister Frank Beattie was invited to train course participants to develop an active faith. This commission also organizes camps for young people who hike, swim, sing, and study the Bible together, to be strengthened in their faith to cope with their own problems and to help witness to their secular schoolmates.

Another form of mission is that of witness through *direct help* to those in need. This is the main realm of our Diakonia. There are homes for old people and children, school centers for disabled children, day care for the needy (cleaning in their homes, bringing meals, caring), the SOS Centrum for the desperate. This service is led in a spirit of Christian love, but the aim is to help and care.

There are also mission attempts being made among the unemployed and weary. So far the work has been started in Prague and in Most (northwest Bohemia). Yet mission, witness of faith and love, which we draw from the Gospel, is also the aim of the Advisory Commission for Children, Youth, and Education. This is mission through *building a fellowship* of friends - brothers and sisters in Christ - from earliest childhood. The children become aware that they belong to the Christian fellowship, where they have their own, natural place. Organizing camps for the children and families, families with disabled children, Bible courses for youth, youth conferences - all this is a part of the mission work of the ECCB. Each year an All-Church Conference for youth--not only Protestant--takes place, with a program that draws young people from various backgrounds. This enables the youngsters to take part spontaneously in singing Christian songs and hearing the Word. Held always on the first weekend in October, almost a thousand young boys and girls gather together.

Every congregation is a place of mission. We cannot do mission actively only among those who are outside of the church. We all need to hear God's Word, study it in the Bible Studies, visit the old and sick, meet as a family at church lunches or coffee breaks, go on a bus trip or a vacation. And what is a stronger mission of a congregation than when a family of brothers and sisters, young and old, witness their common Lord during the worship service and around the Lord's table in Holy Communion?

We are a small, diaspora church, but we are aware of our task, of our calling, of our mission to live and work, love and serve our fellow men and women, in our congregations, villages, towns--wherever we are--for the greater glory of our Lord.

The Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren and Czech Society - by Jan Dus

The relationship between our church and society has been considerably influenced by the political scene prior to 1989. The Communist regime was doing its best to push the churches to the margins of the society, which was accepted both by the majority of the Church and the society. The interest in churches at the beginning of the 1990's (suddenly something that was out of the ordinary) and several years following a period of disillusionment (some people's disapproval of restitution claims of the Catholic Church) seem to be just temporary deviations. The main issue remains the same: the vastly atheistic society without any interest in churches on one side and churches unable to leave their ghetto on the other. True, Czech society, as well as other countries, has been struck by the postmodern interest in religion, though due to Czech atheism it has not been as noticeable, and there is generally opposition to any organizations, including churches.

The relationship between churches and Czech public media could serve as an example of the contemporary situation. Churches complain that the public media have very little interest in publishing materials concerning churches. Recently the spokesperson of the Synodal Council complained that Radio Free Europe (which is not genuinely Czech; it moved from Munich, Germany, to Prague several years ago) is the only public medium showing some interest. Church news is the least attractive topic for traditional Czech media. On the other hand, many people within our church warn of the inability of our spokesperson to present news in an interesting way and to advocate for them--quite exemplary of the inability of churches and society to communicate.

Nevertheless, our church has a long tradition of being concerned about societal and political issues. The late 1990's might be a time at which little step by little step the walls between church and society are being torn down. Many improvements are being achieved at the level of local congregations. Generally speaking, the younger generation is slightly less suspicious towards the church than

their parents. In some places, the collaboration between church and YMCA offers teenagers a good interspace on their way to overcoming anxiety. For others, the outreach of our Diakonia program (nursing homes, kindergartens) is an important witness. On the national level, the General Assembly renders an opinion every year on current national issues, such as: racism (1997), and future membership of the Czech Republic in the European Union (1998). The matter of racism especially has been discussed in different boards at different levels of the church. However, it remains our deficiency that many well-intended and well-conceived proclamations remain almost unnoticed, because they have not been followed by perceptible deeds.

"Second Baptism" - An Issue at Czech General Assembly - by Andrew Stehlik

One of the topics on the agenda of the General Assembly of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren (ECCB) during its 1998 autumn meeting was a matter of The Rev. Jan Klas. Rev. Klas, a sympathizer of the charismatic movement, admitted several years ago that in his church in Benesov he practiced "second baptism," and he himself has been baptized a second time. The General Assembly, unable to solve the problem on the spot, urged him to suspend the practice. Several years of proceedings within the Theological Commission of the GA and the Pastoral Board of the whole ECCB followed. In the final round of meetings with the Pastoral Board, Rev. Klas declared his unwillingness to drop the practice of second baptism altogether, believing that mainly in the cases of personal need, he saw no other way than to administer second baptism. He was warned by the Board that he would, in that case, be dismissed from service in the church. Rev. Klas persisted in his position. The Pastoral Board therefore recommended that the ECCB GA dismiss Rev. Klas from Church service and remove him from the list of officially recognized ministers of the ECCB. He was not, however, dismissed from the Church; in fact his membership in the ECCB was never questioned.

Mr. Jan Klas himself withdrew from ECCB membership approximately one month later, together with around 50 members of his church in Benesov. The church in Benesov is currently closely administered by the vice-moderator of Prague Presbytery.

Everybody is hoping that the decision of the General Assembly concluded this disciplinary problem with one ECCB minister. The more vivid questions concerning administration of baptism remain theologically open and possibly cannot be solved once and for all. Regarding Czech Christian mission work, there is an increasing number of adult baptisms (the first ones), but generally there are at the same time stronger trends towards postponement of baptism from childhood to adulthood.

The Czech Church in the Post-Communist Era - by Jiri and Marie Carda

The Czech Republic belongs to the brotherhood of post-Communist countries. We cannot forget this fact if we want to evaluate our present situation. It will take still at least one generation to overcome the heritage of the Communist era - in all spheres - spiritual, political and economic. Soon we are going to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the 'Velvet Revolution', but many people are still disillusioned, disappointed and do not trust the political leaders. It is the Communist party which is profiting from the present situation. It is now very important that the people get out of their depression and do not hesitate to take over their responsibility in various civic institutions. And it is the challenge of our President Havel not to give up.

A big problem in our country is, of course, the corruption and the increasing rate of unemployment. All this is a challenge for the Christian churches and for our ECCB as well. Polls indicate that sympathies towards Christianity have dropped in the last years to 40% of the population.

In March 1999 our country became, together with Poland and Hungary, a member of NATO. This fact is a very important event from a historical point of view, not only after 40 years of a totalitarian Communistic regime. We thank God that we are free and can live and work in a democratic state. But what is for us in these days most important, is the problem of relations between Church and state. New laws have to be envisioned to replace the old legal system of the Communist state. The Social Democrats, the leading governing party, are working on preparation of such laws. A special commission of experts from the Ecumenical Council of Churches and the Czech Bishops' Conference (from the majority Church) and the politicians has to be formed. The negotiations are going on.

Czech Protestants and the Jews - by Petr Slama

The Jews have been in Bohemia and Moravia since before 1000 B.C.E. Protestants emerged about a half millennium later, sharing the common anti-Semitic attitude of medieval Europeans. The Counter-Reformation drew these two minority groups closer to one another. Historically positively tuned towards the enlightenment, the Czech Protestants felt sympathy for President Masaryk's struggle with anti-Semitism. Under Nazi occupation the majority of the Czech Jews were killed. We can't speak of substantial opposition to the Nazi terror among the Czech Protestants, but there were exceptions: Protestant theologian Prof. J. L. Hromádka before he left for exile in the U.S., Protestant-rooted humanist Pøemysl Pitter, who organized the rescue of Jewish children, and Jaroslav Širnsa, who died in a concentration camp.

There are some 3,000 Jews in the Czech Republic at present (compared to 134,000 on the eve of the WW 11), whose community, after the genocide of the Nazi regime and the gray years of Communism, shows signs of revival in the present situation under the guidance of former dissident and later Orthodox Rabbi Karol Sidon. Reformed Jewish Czech- and English-speaking communities have been established as well.

In spite of innate pro-Jewish sympathies of Czech Protestants (reaching back to shared past history as ostracized people as well as to the distinctly Old Testament-inspired Calvinism among us after the Toleranzpatent), old stereotypes of the chosen people (Christians) versus the condemned ones (Jews) appear here and there. A committee was established by the Synodal Council in 1997 to study relations between Christian and Jews. Some of its members work with the Czech section of the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ), others continue to dialogue on the local level or try to promote learning of the Jewish roots of Christianity and knowledge of today's Judaism. An open letter to the Jewish communities in Bohemia and Moravia was issued at the end of 1997 by Czech theologians from the Comenius Protestant Theological Faculty, dealing critically with the very starting point of the Christian approach towards Jews--the New Testament. There was no official response from the Jewish communities, yet quite a sharp discussion followed in the Church press. Prof. M. Balabán, one of the authors of the open letter, has initiated regular theological contacts with Rabbi Sidon. It is quite vital for Czech Protestants to keep

the issue open. However, due to the tragedy of the Holocaust it's not always clear with whom to have the dialog. What remains is a thorough reevaluation of our own theology so that we won't miss the challenges of today.

Presbyterians Tour Central Europe - by Charles West¹

A group of 25 mostly Presbyterians, lay and clergy, young and old, visited churches in four countries of Central Europe between August 24th and September 7th, 1998. The Europe Office of the Presbyterian Church (USA) sponsored the trip, under the leadership of Duncan Hanson. Its objective was to give the American participants first-hand acquaintance with Reformed Christians in those countries, and to deepen awareness of the Presbyterian Church's involvement in their life, their witness and the problems they face.

It was an enlightening experience. We began in Budapest with a brief introduction to the history and controversies of the Reformed Church in Hungary. We visited a church hospital there, and heard from Stephen and Kaeja Cho, a Korean-American couple commissioned by the Presbyterian Church both in Korea and the United States for ministry in the Reformed Church to the Roma (Gypsy) people in Hungary and Ukraine. Then we went south to the war-ravaged land around Osijek in eastern Croatia, which is still recovering from Serbian occupation. We saw destroyed villages and churches. We talked with people just now pulling their lives and their communities together. But the deepest experience we had, perhaps of the whole trip, was to witness the faith and spirit of the Christians whom we met.

Reformed Church of Croatia Bishop Endre Langh, supported by his pastors and people, emphasized over and over again that forgiveness, not retribution; ecumenical community, not nationalism, are key to the church's witness and God's promise for the future. The same message came from the vibrant spirit of the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek, an ecumenical school uniting all the

¹*CWG Newsletter Editor=s note: The following was written last year by a participant in a PC(USA) Worldwide Ministries Division travel/study seminar to Central Europe. This popular trip is being repeated in the fall of 2000. For more information, please contact the Europe Office at 502-569-5326.*

Protestants in the area, at which Presbyterian workers Steve and Michelle Kurtz, Brett McMichael, and Jim Stover are serving.

Vienna was a different world -- western Europe with a special flavor. Austria has always been overwhelmingly Roman Catholic, but today its Catholic Church is alive with reform movements emphasizing lay participation and ecumenical openness, as we learned from the Rev. Hans Huetter. The Evangelical Church is both Lutheran and Reformed with nine Reformed congregations in it. Most impressive however, was the sense of history which the city exudes despite its modernity, as the onetime capital of all this region.

Prague, our last visit, was in many ways the climax of the trip. The Czech Republic has its own history, from the Hussite Reformation in 1410 to modern times, of protest and self-reliance, of repression, suffering and recovery, and through it all, of a buoyant spirit. It is now one of the most secularized nations in Europe, not burdened by strong nationalism but liberal and idealistic, with a strain of resignation and even cynicism running through it. The challenge before the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren, our sister church there that carries on the Hussite tradition is, as its leaders explained to us, to find the form of the Gospel for a non-religious, secularized society. Churches lost many of their culture-conditioned members, but many have become deeper fellowships of faith thereby. Outreach to the society, they told us, must be through *diakonia*, service which is at the same time witness.

There are plenty of opportunities for this, in a society which experiences too little community and spiritual challenge. As an illustration, the Evangelical Theological Faculty of Charles University, originally the Seminary at which future pastors were, and still are, trained, now is flooded with students who have little religious background but are seeking knowledge about God and the meaning of life.

We came home with a deepened awareness of the way in which we, as American Christians, are part of this turbulent and yet inspiring history. We are bound with these people in a common ministry. The next step is to work it out together.

An American Perspective on the 80th Anniversary of the ECCB - by Stacey Pistorová²

²(Editor's note: Mrs. Pistorova is the daughter of a PC(USA) minister and the wife of Tomas, minister of the Czech Brethren congregation in Teplice.)

How often do we hear, or say ourselves, that the church is dying and has no future in modern-day society? We doubt whether the church can survive another generation when the distractions of the outside world appear overwhelming. On the other hand, we question how the Church limits itself, enclosing itself within its sacred and safe walls from the horrors and realities of the outside world. As I attended the 80th anniversary celebration of the Evangelical Church of the Czech Republic on December 5, 1998, in Prague, I came to realize that these questions do not only haunt churches in the USA. And, throughout the events of the day, as well as those surrounding the planning of this celebration, I saw the true life of the Church shine through the darkness of past history and future doubts.

In the fall of 1998, an invitation was sent out from the Synodal Council (the main office of the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren) to all pastors and congregations of this denomination to celebrate its 80th year of existence, which, considering the turmoil the Czech Church and nation went through in this century, I thought would be an exciting and happy celebration. Yet, the invitation appeared to be more of a plea. It asked the pastors to please convince members of their congregations to attend because the church had rented the large auditorium in the famous Obecny Dum (Community House) in Prague, and they feared it would be empty. Their fears started out a reality when, by the registration deadline, only a small amount of people registered.

However, two weeks before the event, all pastors received their reserved tickets along with an unexpected letter containing a slightly different message than that of the invitation. It stated that more people registered than there was space, and that if someone was not going to use their ticket, to please pass it on to someone who would like to go. What a beautiful problem now confronted the planners of this event. It seemed that the life of the church, and especially this denomination, had overcome the normal doubts and fears that always go into the planning of large events. And, what a wonderful feeling to walk into the hall and be confronted with crowds of people - more than 1500 - who gathered to celebrate their lives in Christ and who shared something in common, not only with each other but with all Christians.

Being an outsider, not only to this country but to all who suffered under Communism, I went with many expectations of what this event would involve. I

expected a day focused on the effects of Communism on the Church as well as a celebration of their new freedom. It had been less than 10 years since the fall of Communism in the Czech Republic, and this was the first anniversary the denomination had celebrated in 30 years. I considered this event very significant to a church whose call to ministry had been greatly repressed for most of its existence (the Communist regime in the Czech Republic lasted from 1948-1989), and I believed they had a right to focus on its hardships. During this time many pastors were unable to work at their true calling, and were forced into jobs such as taxi-driver because they were believed to be a threat, and many members were lost out of fear, never to return to the Church again. I attended this event believing these would be the themes of the day.

The celebration opened with a service of worship led by Panel Smetana, the Synodal Senior. His theme was freedom, but with a different focus than I had in mind. He did not rejoice in the fact that for the last 9 years this church has been free but questioned whether it was free. Using the text John 8:24, he opened with "through the words of our Lord Jesus he places before us the burning question of whether we are a free people." Smetana didn't ask if we live in a free, democratic country, but, rather, whether we are slaves to sin. With these opening remarks, my eyes were opened to my own closed-mindedness, and I heard a message directed to members of the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren, but intended for all.

I, an American born in a country where I was free to practice my own religion, expected, and maybe even wanted, to hear about the woes of Communism and to feel pity for these people who had to struggle in order to attend church, struggle to keep fear from overcoming their faith and beliefs. I wanted to hear these things so that my own faith would be strengthened. I looked for answers to my own questions and doubts about faith and the work of the church. I sought personal strength that went beyond the individual, beyond the Czech condition, beyond any one denomination or religion.

"Are you using your political, personal freedom to be truly free people?" Smetana asked. "Are we free when we have the homeless, where there are people without work, when the Czech people are unable to relate to Romas (Gypsies)?" Following the service of worship, the remainder of the day was an attempt to answer

these questions, to show the attempts made to overcome the problems confronting the modern day church and society.

Presentations were made by pastors on various topics, including the history of the church and this denomination, and some of which addressed the problem of the work of the church, which, for 40 years, this church was unable to do, but which also showed the bigger struggle of Christians and churches all over the world, the struggle for meaning in a dark and materialistic world, the struggle, not for individual freedom, but for truth.

This day was meant for the members of the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren, but we should all listen and learn from its message. We Americans who have never suffered under religious persecution do no more for our homeless, for racism, for the problems which continue to exist in today's society. We pity countries that are poor or that suffer under an unjust government. How often do we try to answer the call of the church, the call of Jesus?

We are all only at the beginning, poor or rich, Communist or democratic. We all have the same struggles and doubts. One could look at this as being hopeless - that the problems are too big everywhere and we are too small to stop them. Or one could look at the true message. This day of celebration showed that through all our doubts and fears the work of the church continues; it lives within these questions and our attempts at answers. The struggles and doubts that we so much dislike are what the church and faith are all about.