

THE POWER OF THE POWERLESS

by Gerhard Linn

Gerhard Linn (Lutheran) is the Executive Secretary for Education in Mission at the World Council of Churches in Geneva. He is an ordained pastor and Oberkonsistorialrat in the Evangelical Church of Berlin-Brandenburg.

There are lessons about the churches' role in society that could be learned by churches in Central and Eastern Europe during a forty-year period of pilgrimage. The worldwide ecumenical fellowship of the Christian churches can celebrate with the churches in the Soviet Union and their former European satellite states their liberation from persecution and oppression. Usually round figures are used to mark the time of those periods of repression--forty years for the former socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, seventy years for the Soviet Union itself. Those round figures invite a peculiar comparison with biblical periods of the same duration: The forty years of Israel's pilgrimage through the desert and the seventy years of Israel's exile in Babylon.

Somehow this comparison can be helpful--especially with regard to the forty-year period which will be referred to in this article. When Israel finally started to settle in the 'promised land' it had to practice its faith under totally new social and economic conditions. The temptation was at hand to forget the spiritual experience of the forty years of pilgrimage through the desert and to adjust thoroughly to the new situation. The temptation was at hand to worship another God--a God who guarantees fertility of the land in particular and economic growth in general. It became vital for Israel's spiritual leaders to remind the nation again and again of those forty years and its special spiritual lessons: The same God who has led us through the desert is the one who is with us in this new situation! Do not forget the lessons of the past, yet do not idealize the past either!

In that sense I am going to try to name some of the lessons we could have learned during our forty years pilgrimage and to indicate their relevance for the new situation now.

1) The radical social political change in our countries, a change from a centralized repressive regime to a pluralist democracy, from a planned and controlled economy to a so-called free market could suppose that a restoration of social conditions of a society fifty and more years ago would be appropriate. We have to resist the temptation of such a restoration. We should know that the time is gone when church, Christian faith and related values and political power seemed to be united in Europe. The period of those forty years could have opened our eyes for this fact. In some West European countries one still can close one's eyes towards this fact since the majority of inhabitants still are members of a Christian church--often members of one particular confessional church which plays the role of a national church. Yet in Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and East Germany the socialist regimes succeeded to promote the process of secularization in a way that its implications became obvious. The majority of people no longer look to the

Christian church as a possible source for orientation in their life. The majority of people have not even a clear idea what the Christian faith is about.

This development has forced the churches in those countries to cope with the reality of representing only a minority of the population and the reality that the different realms of life are not longer ruled or influenced by Christian values. Thus we learned to ask God to let us understand what he expects from his church as a minority in a secularized society. We learned to re-read biblical passages dealing with the role of the Christian community as a little flock in the midst of a hostile world. And we learned to affirm the role of this little flock being sent to communicate God's love to all people. Since we all live by receiving God's love, we ardently wish that all people may hear the message of God's love in Jesus Christ for them. Yet this does not mean that we want to have a form of society where all are forced to listen to the voice of the church. Since we are convinced that the Gospel is not only meant for all individual human beings but is meant to shape all realms of life, we ardently wish to make clear how the Gospel is relevant for these realms of life to live respectively. Yet this does not mean that we want to undo the enlightenment by an effective "re-christianization" of Europe. We could experience how a firm and determined minority can play a decisive role in the society, how a very small church without power and without leading role in society can win new credibility and the confidence of people who do not believe in Christ or do not even know what the Christian faith is about. This way of a minority church corresponds to the way of Christ who does not impose his invitation.

2) The churches in the former socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe could learn to appreciate a clear separation between church and state. But is that separation necessary only if the state is hostile against the Christian faith? What about the relationship between state and church now when the state is ready to support the churches?

Of course, this is not problem for the so-called free churches whose historical self-understanding is based on the independence from the state. But it is a problem for all those churches which used to be state churches and normally did not give up this status voluntarily. The fight for constitutional separation between church and state launched by leftist and liberal political parties in some European countries in the beginning of this century had aimed at the limitation of the churches' influence in society and at the liberation of society from a so-called clerical tutelage. Therefore the churches themselves found it difficult to accept the separation because it is a good instrument to prevent interference and tutelage in both directions. They could discover the freedom of the church being a very precious good.

During the various disputes and even conflicts between the East German government and the Protestant churches, both sides on different occasions have appealed to the constitutional separation between church and state. If for instance government officials tried to influence church elections or tried to define the criteria of a gathering being a religious one in order to limit the range of possible church activities, we could refuse such attempts by unmasking them as interference of the state into church affairs. On the

other hand government officials would refer to the separation of church and state every time when we criticized in the interest of all people particular policies of the state. They would call our statements interference into state affairs. Then we would remind them that separation between church and state cannot mean separation between church and people. If the state acts against the interests of the population and violates its own specific responsibility, it is the task of the church to be the voice of those whose voice is being suppressed. The clear separation between church and state in East Germany helped the churches there to play that role. The situation of the churches in those countries, where like in Czechoslovakia the churches even under Communist rule remained state churches was far more difficult. All the more it should be kept in the memory of the ecumenical family how courageous Christians in that country witnessed their faith and dared to call a government lie a lie and were prepared to pay their price.

Yet there is still another factor to be mentioned: the role of the Evangelical church in East Germany as an opposite number to the state has been facilitated by the fact that Christians had no access to leading positions neither in the government nor in the army. So we had to face the critical question asked by some Christians in the West: if army officers could be members of your synod would the synod still be able to declare that refusal of military service bearing arms is a clearer witness to Christ than to join the army? In the new situation of a democratic society Christians may take responsibilities in government positions and participate in church decision making bodies as well some disputes once disputes between church and state will take place within the church itself. It might become more difficult to reach clarity of our witness in the ambiguity of all social life.

Nowadays some western German government officials are complaining that the interest of eastern German church leaders to keep an ongoing clear separation between church and state is no longer justified with a state not hostile to the church. This complaint is based on the misunderstanding that the church needs independence from the state only if the state is somehow hostile to the church. The separation between church and state is the essential prerequisite for a partnership between church and state--a partnership in the interest of both since it can help both better to fulfill their specific tasks, a partnership in the interest of the population at large since their freedom will have better chances.

3) It is time to deal not only with the role of the church but with the role of individual Christians as well. Whilst the church as a body could learn to affirm the minority status and to appreciate a clear separation between state and church, the situation for many individual Christians within the society ruled by an anti-Christian regime was often far more difficult. Some of them did not only experience what it meant to belong to a minority, they often had to face the reality of being the only Christian in a group of colleagues or fellow-students. The danger of resignation and passivity towards the ruling trends in the society was very real.

In this situation some of us were convinced that the main task of our witness would be to fight against this resignation even in the sense of casting out demons--the demon who always whispers: "You cannot do anything about it." We knew that resignation is not the

attitude of faith--on the contrary, with the attitude of resignation faith would die. We were impressed by the example of some Roman Catholic friends in Czechoslovakia who had told us how they had developed an attitude of "somethingism" during their being in prison as victims of Stalinist trials. There is always something you can do--may it be ever so tiny--and the small thing you can do is important. Do not wait for the great things you can not do!

Yet it was not adequate just to preach this attitude. We had to develop platforms of exchange of information and views in the local congregations, platforms where Christians could help each other to get to know the mechanisms of our society, to understand better the various factors of social changes and to find out where they themselves could participate actively in a modest way. There were always some uncomfortable tasks in the society left for those who were prepared to serve. We deliberately tried to encourage each other to take up such tasks whilst we had to live with the fact that influential positions were reserved for party members. We called those platforms of exchange 'parish seminars,' and they were marked by the constant effort to apply the biblical message to the challenges of daily life in the family, at the working place, and in society at large.

One example for this effort is that in 1969 I convened a study group of around 15 persons to study the government plans to introduce what they called "industry-like methods of production in agriculture." This group--composed of farmers, rural pastors, a rural teacher, a rural medical doctor, and three experts worked for a year to produce a memorandum to be presented to the synod of our church in March 1970. In this memorandum we analyzed the intentions of the government, described its consequences for the future living and working conditions of people in the countryside and named specific tasks of the church to accompany the people and to encourage them to shape the process towards their own interest as far as possible.

When this document was distributed to the synod and was put on the agenda for discussion later, the two state observers who used to be present in our synod meetings when they were open to the public, officially protested to the moderator against the very fact of having this point on the agenda. They threatened that the church would have to endure serious consequences if this would not be withdrawn. They did not criticize the content of the memorandum but simply stated that this is an interference into state affairs, and it has nothing to do with religion. It cannot be tolerated that the church deals with government affairs in such a way.

I had to redraft my introductory speech to the synod and to explain to the state officials that in the 19th century Marxists rightly criticized the church that it only tried to heal the wounds of victims of the industrial revolution instead of coping with the mechanisms of the development itself. We have learned from this criticism and tried to name social consequences of an intended process of change in time. In more private discussions we then tried to find out what really had made the state officers so angry. They had two basic reproaches,

(a) You have used confidential information of state institutes and made it public, they said. It was easy to prove that this was not true. We had used published information--but published in an expert journal only specialists would read.

(b) You have described the whole intended process of radical change in the rural areas whilst the government wanted to inform the farmers only step by step in order not to shock them, they said.

This was the real point. The state treated the farmers like children to whom one cannot say the whole truth. This was typical of the attitude of the Communists. They wanted to keep the population under tutelage turning society into a big kindergarten. This time we had disturbed them. Our memorandum whose content they admitted was correct and became the basis information for many parish seminars in the villages.

Thus we tried to resist the temptation of a retreat behind church walls, the temptation of resignation. This temptation is also at hand in the new situation of a pluralist society although the reasons for it are different.

Many people find it difficult to understand the economic and political mechanisms at work in the other form of society. Again they feel themselves being powerless without the capacity to do anything about it. So the spiritual fight against resignation has to be applied to this new situation.

4) In the context of that spiritual fight against resignation we could learn to affirm the key role of the local worshipping community and therefore the role of the local parish providing the essential platform for it. Whilst radical church reformers in the West tended to blame the local parish as a hindrance rather than a source for renewal, we learned to appreciate the local parish as a potential platform for sustaining community. Individual Christians with their daily attempts to live their faith, to do what they had understood to be God's will and therefore, if necessary, to 'swim against the stream' could not survive without belonging to a community, a group of fellow-Christians which became a sustaining community for them.

Yet there are specific factors which facilitate a sustaining community, factors which are not automatically present in a local parish. If they are missing the above mentioned radical church reformers are right with their critique of the average local parish.

One essential factor is the relevance of the activities of the local congregation for the daily life of its members. That is why the ecumenical study on missionary congregations in the 1960s talked about "the world setting the agenda" for the church at large and the local congregation in particular. All aspects of the daily life struggle of the people, issues of society as well as family life, issues of the future of humankind as well as the future of individuals have to be points of agenda for a worshipping community. To correspond to this need we have promoted those parish seminars mentioned previously. There are participants who could help each other to find answers to their vital questions through a

common search for better understanding of the social reality in which they live, for better understanding God's will for their present situation.

The participatory style of those seminars and similar gatherings helped us to discern another essential factor for sustaining community: in the common search for orientation everybody's contribution was needed. Active participation of all became essential. Those involved could experience what it means that the Holy Spirit gives everybody a particular gift to be used for the common good (cf. I Cor 12:4-7).

In a society where creativity was never encouraged because it could become dangerous for those in power, the very experience that my contribution is needed by others could become a source of spiritual strengthening. At the same time one essential part of the gospel itself could be experienced: as sure as God loves me I count; my presence matters for others and I can grow; I can transcend my limitations which so far seemed to be the walls of an unchangeable prison.

To make such experiences lasting one had, of course, to belong to a steady community and not only to a seminar which met for a limited period. A normal local parish quite naturally can be the platform for all kinds of groups which together build up the local congregation when it assembles--first of all to worship together. Such groups as well as the common worship service can be places for common sharing of sorrows and joys in an atmosphere of mutual openness and trust. By that the very community becomes a witness to Christ since it is a place where His love can be experienced. Most of those who came to believe in Christ during that period of repression of the Christian faith found their way to Christ because they had been attracted by the spirit of mutual care they could observe in a community of Christians. One could find an atmosphere of mutual confidence and tolerance in the Christian congregations and their groups which was different from the atmosphere of ideological control and mutual mistrust prevailing in the society.

In the 1980s in East-Germany whole groups of people who had committed themselves to respond to particular threats to the life of humankind like the arms race, the violation of human rights, and the destruction of environment turned to local parishes to ask them for shelter and the chance to share their concern with a congregation. Again the local parish proved to be indispensable.

In the new situation new initiatives would no longer directly depend on the platform of local parishes. All the more we should deliberately connect all new activities to the bearing continuity of local parishes.

5) In September 1987 I have organized on behalf of the WCC (CWME) a consultation in Poland which brought representatives from churches in all eight European socialist countries together to discuss the missionary task of their churches with regard to the challenges of a socialist society as well as its restrictions for the activity of the church. Observers from churches in other parts of the world participating in that consultation were surprised to see how 'conservative' the churches in Eastern Europe were. Together

with them I tried to evaluate the observation that the farther one goes towards the East, the deeper is the faithfulness to tradition. What might be the reason?

There are at least two major factors which make that phenomenon understandable. One has to do with the situation of persecution. In such a situation it is vital not to give the hostile state officials an excuse to interfere just because one alters a century old tradition. It is easier to defend the continuity of that tradition than experimental attempts of new expressions of Christian life. The other factor is the legitimate human desire in times of rapid change and struggle to survive in spite of repressions to find at least in the church an anchor provided by the continuity of what was familiar and handed down already from previous generations.

The positive result of this 'conservatism' should teach us to be more careful towards tradition. Church history does not start with us. We depend on the passing of faith for many generations, and we should respect more the vessels of that passing. Take for instance the vessel of the regular Sunday Service, the liturgy. When the Russian Communists prohibited all activities of the Orthodox Church except the liturgy, they thought this would force the church to die. They were wrong because the worship service with all its repetitions of traditional liturgical forms remained the source of spiritual strengthening and now proves to be the source for a renewal of the Russian Orthodox Church whose activities after the liturgy may contribute to the renewal of the whole society.

In this context I should mention also the following: In our efforts to fight against resignation and to find sources for spiritual strengthening we also learned to appreciate traditions and customs in general, festive rituals for instance related to particular events or yearly-repeated feasts. Such traditions can have a community building and thus a bearing capacity. It seems to be easy to destroy them but difficult to replace them. When the Communists tried to replace them by their uniforming rituals, they did not realize that uniforming rituals do not allow people to own them individually. Yet traditions and rituals which allow local variety and individual contributions do play the up-building role I mentioned since they can be owned.

6) There may be churches which have not yet experienced their belonging to a worldwide ecumenical family as being something essential. The situation they are living in might suppose that they could afford to live on their own. But Churches which have to endure constraints or even persecution know from experience that their belonging to a worldwide family institutionalized in the World Council of Churches is of vital importance.

Thus the churches in the former European socialist countries could learn to appreciate their being part of the ecumenical movement, their being members of the World Council of Churches for several reasons. All of them could, though to a different extent, profit from the interest of the Communist governments to produce a good image towards the world opinion. Those in power in our countries were afraid of the power of world opinion. The persistent interest of representatives of other churches or of representatives of the WCC to find out how churches in those countries were allowed to function often

helped to lighten the burden of those churches or to strengthen their efforts to witness despite all repercussions.

Yet exactly in this context in some countries the role of some church leaders is heavily criticized. There are believers who complain that church leaders did not use their ecumenical international context to communicate the truth to the worldwide ecumenical family or to ask for outside solidarity with imprisoned lay Christians or priests. Especially in the Soviet Union the member churches of the WCC are confronted with the critique of believers who see the role of the WCC discredited since the official Communist propaganda has praised the World Council of Churches as an ally in the international struggle against imperialism.

All the more it is necessary to give Christians in this country the opportunity to experience the international ecumenical fellowship in the midst of the crisis of their country and the immense new chances and tasks of their church.

But at least for Czechoslovakia and East-Germany I can affirm that the ecumenical movement played an essential role for us when we struggled to find our way in a hostile surrounding. A host of ecumenical visitors from all continents helped us with their questions, with their pastoral interest; they helped us to be liberated from a fatal self-pity and to understand the social problems in our country in a worldwide context. The participation in WCC programs like the program to combat racism or the conciliar process on Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation became a vital instrument to overcome our isolation, to contribute to those efforts of the ecumenical movement from our point of view as well as to see clearer certain challenges in the own society and to address them. In the 1980s the WCC was probably nowhere more popular than in thousands of congregations in East Germany. We knew out of experience how much we need the fellowship of the ecumenical world family--to get spiritually encouraged and corrected and sometimes to get direct help. This experience should be used as an incentive for our churches to practice now a stronger solidarity with churches in other parts of the world.

7) One last area of learning should be mentioned: we could learn to become more sensitive, more perceptive for God's acting in history. When we became aware that the Communist regime practiced its concept to limit or even dissolve the role of the church in society and to degrade Christians to second or third class citizens, many Christians at least in East Germany drew the conclusion that God has forsaken us. God is no longer with us, no longer acting amongst us. The next step of that conclusion often was the decision to emigrate to the West. We had to resist this conclusion and to affirm to all Christians in our part of Germany: It is not true that God has forsaken us. It is not true that God is only with those living in the West. Yet it is true that God the Lord of history is present and acting in every form of society. It is true that God does not depend on us Christians to pursue God's plan with human history. But God expects us to accept the way God is leading us.

In those efforts to discern God's will for our situation many passages of the Old Testament helped us, especially the famous letter of the prophet Jeremiah to the Israelites

in the Babylonian exile. Thus we learned to accept God's way although it would not comfort us.

Decades later we could experience another aspect of God's acting in history--again a surprising one. God obviously used another "Kyros" to bring about a political change most of us did not dare to hope for. Yet the first enthusiasm about the unexpected liberation is long since overshadowed by new concerns and difficulties which again challenge us to be perceptive for the voice of God's spirit.

We have to be very careful not to forget the lessons in God's school. God has really "put down the mighty from their thrones" (Luke 1:52), God has broken the power of those who had made us powerless. But as sure as God expects us to follow Christ's way, God wants us to continue to be powerless, to be a servant church rather than a triumphant one.