

An Account of the Methodist Witness in Czechoslovakia

Group 6

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I was asked to prepare a brief statement focussing on two issues:

1. The distinctive Christian witness which its doctrinal heritage enables Methodism to make in the eastern European cultural and political context.
2. The Methodist basis for, and contribution to, ecumenical discussion and cooperation in our context.

This is due to the fact that I am the only member of this group coming from eastern Europe. Nonetheless, I have to say that I cannot speak on behalf of east European situation on the whole. The situation in each country differs a good deal. What follows concerns our particular Czechoslovak situation.

This paper is in two parts. The first part reflects briefly (a.) the setting of Christianity amidst socialist society generally and, (b.) particular Methodist contribution to Christian witness in Czechoslovakia. The second part would then be (a.) an attempt to state what is the Methodist Church's understanding of its legitimacy and (b.) an account of our ecumenical activity.

1.a. When we think of the western civilization, we consider it to be a Christian one. To what extent this is so remains questionable. However it is clear and unambiguous that Christianity and churches have their firm place therein. In one case a constitution is Christian-oriented, in another ^{ONE} churches have decisive positions as to social care or school system and so forth. Throughout centuries Christianity was bringing standards that are still widely recognized. Although many people do not live according to them, they are here as an "ideal niveau". This surely prepares an indispensable place for church's doctrine and its social consequences. We observe intertwinings of the church and state structures.

When we think of our state, all the context is quite different. Following February 1948, the leadership of the state overtook the Communist Party. Its leading ideology is Marxism-Leninism, basically and programatically atheistic. State - churches relations were regulated by a new church law. According to it, churches have its autonomy, but the supervision is in hands of state authorities. Clergymen of all the churches are paid by the state notwithstanding that their employer is the church. There is necessary to have a previous approval for ministers' appointment making. This approval is issued by respective authorities on request of the Church Board. Equality of rights is guaranteed for all churches, small as well as big, so that there are not privileged churches in our country. The churches, however, cannot count with support, in sense of having recourse to the state. So - called Constantine Era when the state and church were on one line came to its end. The state is being led by a different ideology than the church. This must of course produce contrasts and problems. The church had to get accustomed to stand on its own legs and to understand that its only strength is the word of God, the Gospel. Many denominations, including ours, were confronted with decline of active membership since many people were not willing to confess their faith publicly because of fear of possible loss in their post. This new situation certainly is spiritually beneficial, however, it depends very much upon how many believers can really evaluate or appreciate the value of God's word on which the church stands.

1.b. The late professor of the Comenius Theological Faculty in Prague Dr. Josef Hromádka used to say a parable about the needed contribution of the churches in a socialist society. "Socialist society is like a new building", expressed Prof. Hromádka, "but this building has no central heating. Let the church become this and each member of the church be a radiator which makes rooms of that building warm, fit to live in!" Is there any other denomination which has a better chance to meet this need of our society than the Methodist church? In the family of the Czechoslovak churches, the Methodists represent not only an awakened, evangelical type of church, but also a kind of mo-

dern religious community which is organized on a world level. This broad communion facilitates a more immediate view of the problems of the world and constitutes a barrier against nationalistic and provincial tendencies.

In the new situation following 1948 the activities of the churches must have been centered into local congregations. Social work took the state on itself, public evangelistic rallies in the open air were not allowed. That is why also working groups and committees of the Annual Conference have produced mainly recommendations to be used for upbringing our church members as to their social awareness. Concrete consequences of it are in hands of each individual Methodist. As to the evangelistic effort, conferences have been maintaining to bring back to life the work of Methodist classes, since this proved to be the most efficient tool of evangelization nowadays, with regard to our context. That is one of the reasons why special attention is being devoted to the church's co-workers. Both men and women are accepted for theological studies. Future theologians studying at a theological faculty must, in addition to their normal study curriculum, prove a knowledge of Methodist history, theology and order. Lay co-workers attend four-year correspondence courses of Bible study and church history as well as systematic and practical theology. Completion of this course is a prerequisite for ordination. Supplementary training of the church's workers takes place at regular meetings of pastors, where attention is paid especially to the Methodist legacy, in addition to the Bible and other questions.

2.a. This second part of my brief statement concerns ecumenical discussion and cooperation in Czechoslovakia. First let me say that we Methodists feel to be competent for working in the ecumenical movement and therefore we appreciate being active members of the Ecumenical Council of Churches in Czechoslovakia. This body was founded in 1955. It saw as its mission the fostering of a deeper understanding and greater closeness among the churches in this country, the undertaking of a joint study of the legacy of the Czech Reformation and the initiating of contacts with churches abroad (including a specific contribution toward "European Conso-

validation" through close contacts with the German brethren); its obvious task also was to initiate more systematic contacts with the churches in the countries of our Eastern neighbours. At the world ecumenical forum, the Czechoslovak ECC supported the suggestion that the WCC also devote attention in its project to timely social and political problems, especially the question of preventing war in the atomic era. It is clear that Methodism has a lot in its heritage to make a significant contribution to these tasks of the ECC. Besides our doctrinal richness, I am thinking of experiences from several unification processes and a strong peace activity of recent years.

2.b. When we consider the small Methodist church in Czechoslovakia then we have to say that our involvement into ecumenical projects and actions is great. We participate in the work of numerous ecumenical bodies. Beside the above mentioned ECC, the Methodist Church is a member of the Christian Peace Conference (to which it offered, in 1959 and 1960, rooms on the premises of its congregation in Prague 2 for the sessions of international conferences). Since 1970, it also has been taking part in the work of the Conference of European Churches as a member of it. Members of our church are active in the various commissions and committees of those international and national ecumenical organizations. We take part in all the official ecumenical activities, of which the most important is the annually held a common Week of Prayer (it began in 1956).

Finally I would mention our publication activity. It is also a part of our ecumenical coexistence that we publish books exploring or exposing our identity. So we published an extract of Wesley's Journal and Sermons. We also use our church magazine to promote Methodism, several mimeographed publications on our history and on other topics were distributed, outreaching our membership. Our church played also an active role in initiating and translating of the New Ecumenical Translation of the Bible, which first appeared in 1979.