

Ecumenical Bulletin 51 – Christmas 2020

Dear readers,

It is always a good idea to draw attention to anniversaries both great and small. Their meaning is not lost; it is still as valid today as it was several hundred years ago. Anniversaries are to be commemorated.

This time we offer you three and all of them are to a greater or lesser extent connected with the existence of our church, the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren.

The Battle of the White Mountain took place on Sunday, November 8, 1620. It is therefore exactly 400 years ago, and this year the date of November 8 also fell on a Sunday. The anniversary events, which were planned long in advance, had to be severely reduced due to the covid-19 pandemic, but their importance was not diminished! What does the battle itself and the post-White Mountain period, the Thirty Years' War and the "Dark Ages", mean to Czechs? Up to half a million people went into exile during the violent re-Catholicization of that time. It is a deep scar that members of the Protestant churches, as well as of the Catholic Church, are aware of, and during the annual "celebration" their representatives try to find common ground. And I think it has been going well in recent years.

The second anniversary follows the first. 350 years ago, Jan Amos Komenský, Bishop of the Unity of Brethren, pedagogue and philosopher, "teacher of nations", died. He too had been forced to leave our country for good in this "dark age".

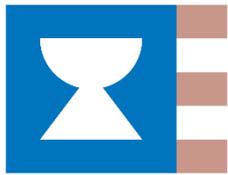
The third anniversary concerns our present, the 1950s, the time of communist Czechoslovakia. Among more than two hundred executed by the regime, there was only one woman, the erudite lawyer Milada Horáková, a member of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren. In June this year we marked 70 years since her murder. Dear friends, the meaning of Christmas does not change, the coronavirus does not alter it. It can only add to its meaning. Let us hold on to hope in times both of good and evil!



„When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, „the LORD has done great things for them.““ (Ps 126: 1–2, NRSV)

On behalf of the Editorial Board
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The foundations of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren stem from the Hussite church (1431–1620) and the Unity of the Brethren (1457–1620). The Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren (ECCB) was established in 1918, when the Lutheran and Calvinist wings of the local protestant creed were united in one. Their existence, however, had not been legal until Joseph II issued his Patent of Toleration in 1781, following a long and tough anti-reformation campaign that began in 1620. Even after issuing the Patent of Toleration, Protestants still had to face many restrictions, which would only be lifted following the Protestant Patent of 1861.

At the time of its establishment, the ECCB had 250,000 members, the number increased to 325,000 in 1938. Today, the church is divided into 14 seniorates and has a total of approximately 250 congregations and 100,000 members. The church is headed by a six-member Synodal Council, elected for a six-year period, represented by the Synodal Senior and Synodal Curator.

A message to postmodernity. The intersection of the life story of an Italian student with ancient historical events

I, Alberto Rocchini, come from Pavia, where I studied literature and history. During my study stay in Mainz, Germany, I became passionate about the Reformation, and after returning to Italy, I enrolled in the Waldensian Church. This small church (now with about 50,000 members throughout Italy) was able to expand from the original alpine center on the border of Italy and France after the Tolerance Edict of King Albert of Piedmont in 1848. The Waldensian Church



is a successor to the medieval movement led by Peter Valdes of Lyon. As early as 1532, with the decision of the Chanforan Synod, they joined the Geneva Reformation. In the spirit of mutual enrichment, they also cultivated contacts with the Czech Brethren.

After various work and life experiences, I went from Vienna via Brno to Prague, where I worked as a teacher of Italian and German. I got to know the Hussite Reformation in Bohemia and found that it is also part of the so-called „first Reformation“, which includes the Waldensian movement. In 2013, I applied to study theology at the Hussite Theological Faculty of Charles University, where this autumn I

will complete my master's degree in the Waldensian Church, its history, thinking and organization.

I am a member of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, and if God leaves me in the Czech Republic, I would like to serve as a pastor here. I would like to contribute to the awareness and deepening of mutual historical and theological relations between the Czech and Italian Churches. Both bear the legacy of the first Reformation and, despite different sociological contexts, speak boldly and confidently to postmodern people with the gospel of God's grace. Some ideas from the conclusion of Albert Rocchini's master's thesis:

I tried to follow and outline the key events of a historical nature that led to the birth of the Waldensian movement at the end of the 12th century. Typical among these are the close relationship to the Helvetic Reformation in the 16th century, the emancipation of the Savoy and then Italian states, and the diasporal spread of the Gospel that characterizes the Waldensian Church to the present day. I wanted to show the ongoing Waldensian movement, which during nine centuries of evangelical witness and fierce persecution spread in Europe an alternative secular „non-Constantine“ church model of men and women zealous for the gospel of the „servant Christ“, which, like the Apostle Paul, encourages „if I do not preach the gospel“. (1 Corinthians 9:16)

My resolve was to show the deep links between the Waldensian and Hussite movements and their mutual enrichment: how the Waldensian movement affected and may have even paved the way for the Hussite revolution in Bohemia, and how later the Waldensian could rely on academic theological reflection situation.

At the same time, I wanted to present the current Waldensian Church with its reformed faith, its structures and ideas that permeate Italian society. But I also wanted to show a model of „integration“ between the Waldensian and Methodist churches that has been in place since 1975. Perhaps it could be a model for other small European churches, such as the Czechoslovak Hussite Church and the Czech Brethren Evangelical Church.

For an Italian critical Catholic who is looking for his spiritual home or some alternative way to be a Christian in a pluralistic society, the small Waldensian Church is a simple light, such as light coming from a candle or from an open Bible on the Lord's table. This heritage, based on the Reformation – sola fide, sola gratia, sola scriptura (faith alone, grace alone, Scripture alone) – is liberating and at the same time leads to responsibility. And our postmodern society, characterized by individualism and relativism, is in dire need of that.

Fidelity stronger than Death



Petr Jašek had a dream some time ago. A threatening dream. It was in the year 2013. He seemed to be locked in a cell, sitting on the floor on ice tiles, staring at the light coming through a small window at the top of the locked door. He could not get rid of the vision, and more than two years later, at the end of 2015, the dream came true. Petr Jašek was arrested in Sudan and sentenced as a spy to more than twenty years in prison. Thanks to the efforts of the Czech government and the Ambassador of the Czech Republic to Cairo, he was released in 2017; officially on the basis of a pardon granted by Sudanese President Bashir. He wrote a book about this event called

‘Wedding Ring for Life’, published this year by Stefanos.

Petr Jašek is a minister’s child, his father was a parish minister of the ECCB.

He graduated from the University of Chemical Technology in Prague. He then completed postgraduate studies in clinical biochemistry at the Institute of Hematology and Blood Transfusion, where he worked for 20 years. For the next ten years, 1992–2002, he was the director of the hospital in Počátky. Finally, he underwent a three-month postgraduate study of health and healthcare management in Israel. In the 1990s, he was one of the founders of a Czech organization called Helping the Persecuted Church, which then became part of the International Christian Association (ICA), whose mission is to support and assist persecuted Christians in many countries around the world. Today, Petr devotes himself fully to this. He and his wife Vanda live in Buštěhrad and attend the congregation of the Church of the Brethren in Kladno. They have one daughter, one son and their first granddaughter.

Why is your book called that?

For the first two months after my arrest, I was in a cell with Islamic State fighters. They wanted my ring as a tax on the non-Muslim population. So that they wouldn't take it from me even with my finger cut off, I preferred to give it to them. Then my wife and I bought new ...

So as a hospital director, you graduated in 2002, what happened next?

Then I started working for ICA, our sister organization in America, and the purpose of our work is to provide targeted assistance to Christians around the world who are persecuted and injured, primarily because they have not rejected their faith. If a Christian who is asked to become a Muslim refuses, his left arm and right leg should be cut off as a warning. This is an authentic statement of Muhammad. And this also applies to children. So our medical program was focused on helping people who had either or both limbs amputated.

It is definitely an activity that requires great mental strength from a person, it is not for anyone. How did you even realize that you wanted to go in such a rather unusual direction?

We have to go back to totalitarianism, to 1978, when I was in high school and we were interrogated by the StB. At that time, my father showed me a book by the Romanian Jew Richard Wurmbrand, which became the second most important book for me after the Bible. Richard Wurmbrand experienced 14 years in a communist dungeon, was imprisoned twice,

and spent three years in solitary confinement, which few really survived. Thanks to him, I understood that if one really wants to live by faith, that is, faithfully, one does not have to be afraid. If we want to be faithful to God, God will give us strength. Then, already in university, in 1992, another colleague, Stanislav Forejt, and I, following the example of Richard Wurmbrand, founded a branch of the International Christian Association in our country, and our Czech organization is called Help for the Persecuted Church. It was about helping in countries that are not free, just as people in the West helped us during totalitarianism. Richard Wurmbrand was the founder of the association in 1967. The main purpose is to inform each other about those who are persecuted and to help them and their families. Every two months we publish a Bulletin called The Voice of the Martyrs.

But what does your activity look like in practice? When you're home, how do you know what to do?

There are about seventy countries where Christians are persecuted in the world. We have branches in those countries, so we know what is needed. When something happens today, it is known very quickly in the electronic world. In Africa, there is a mobile transmitter in every jungle! There is no water, there is no electricity, but a mobile signal is. I became the regional director, I was in charge of literally half the world – from Pakistan to Europe, then the whole of Africa. Since 2011, I've only been in charge of Africa, I've been to Nigeria about thirty times in the last 15 years, and that is where the most serious cases have been. It can be expected that local hospitals will not provide the proper level of care for a person whose limb has been cut off. For example, we have built a prosthetic laboratory in northern Nigeria that is able to create state-of-the-art prostheses. The problem, however, is that the indigenous inhabitants will almost rather be left with a stump than wear a modern aid ...

You are obviously a strong personality. You have even been in prison, in a world that is terrifying. When you started, did you have to be aware of the risks, how did you deal with it?

I took it as an honour. It was about paying off debts, that's what I said. I didn't think so much about danger. I remember when I first smuggled the Bible into Iran or Algeria, it was an honour for me. And a very important aspect is that it is about a Christian helping a Christian. It is the belonging of the limbs of one body, as the Apostle Paul says – if one limb suffers, the whole body suffers!

Why did you actually go to Sudan then?

I went there in December 2015 to check and photograph injuries, burns, for specialists from Finland. They were of the son of a Muslim cleric who became a Christian while studying in Khartoum, a heinous crime. The secret service threw an incendiary bomb at him, which left him with burns over a large part of his body.

How was your family aware of the danger?

My wife takes my job as a mission, she is identified with it. She used to ride with me, and my daughter was with me in Nigeria, then studying medicine for the second year, she had the opportunity to make dressings there – who has such experience here?!

But when you went to Sudan, did you expect to be locked up?

That must be taken into account, but on the other hand – if you go somewhere for 15 years and always return, as planned, you will somehow get used to it. And it was in the Sudan that I got a visa to wait in Vienna, they smiled at me, shook my hand ... For four days in Khartoum, it's nothing.

And when they locked you up? Did you believe that someone from outside would intervene? Or will you be there for life? Could they even kill you?

After all, one gradually adapts somehow. At first you believe it will be for a few days, then you believe it will be for a month; and as the time lengthens ... After four months of interrogation, I was brought before a judge who had read seven paragraphs of the accusations against me, of which two brought the death penalty. The investigation by the prosecutor lasted another four months, and then the trial began. I would probably say that I gradually got used to it, but the hope of release was still there. Certainly. Specific stories also poured power into me. For example, when about 12 Eritreans came to a crowded cell with inhuman conditions and I suddenly felt God's instruction to go after them. I managed to get in among them and preach the gospel to them. We are back to that loyalty. I told them how I believed and they were struck. We prayed together and I suddenly felt that this was the reason I was stuck here for months. It stopped bothering me that it was dragging on, because maybe I had a task from God here!

Did you have any opportunity to find out what was happening with us to support you? That petitions were being signed here, that a prayer chain had been created?

The visit of our consul from Egypt helped me a lot, the first time was 11 days after the arrest. I knew that our ambassador to Egypt was also taking some radical steps. But I only knew about the events in our country from letters, which started arriving after three months. The situation was better only in the last prison, the guards sold mobile phones in addition to drugs, so my connection to the world was established – phones are banned, but everyone has one. Even the prisoners themselves signed the petition for my release by telephone, half a million signatures were obtained! Or I could see a you tube demonstration for my release in front of the Sudanese embassy in Madrid, I couldn't help but cry. It also helped me a lot that there was a chapel in the last prison.

How is it possible?

There was also a mosque, and because there were prisoners from South Sudan, and they were Christians, they had to make a chapel for them under the constitution, even if it was made out of a cell. When my „luxurious“ stay in the solitude ended, I found myself in a cell with 100

people; but suddenly we had a chapel. I approached two Sudanese pastors and they said - "you have a Bible, you will preach first". I had a stack of notes ready that I had been secretly preparing in solitary confinement when I read the Bible there, so now I could preach. In a Sudanese prison! Even five times a week!

I understand that this was a big change, but I still can't imagine how you managed to keep your balance all that time.

Of course I wasn't happy. The worst was always in the morning. On the one hand, they brought the first meal at one o'clock, the drinking water was brown, it was waiting for the mud to settle a little, after all, depressed feelings settled on me. But when I began to preach, these morning sorrows vanished. The assurance that God had a job there for me was a great thing. At least 20 people went to church at first, but gradually there were far more of them, when I preached on Christmas Day in 2016, over two hundred people came. Even Muslims were there. Then I really stopped caring about how long I would be there – I would be there as long as the Lord God wanted. Here again we can mention that fidelity – when a person surrenders his life to Christ, he must reckon with the fact that God can take him to places that are not exactly pleasant; after all, according to the Bible, the persecution of Christians is an integral part of their lives. But why? Why does the world hate you? Because you are not of this world! That's why you're dangerous! That is why Sudanese President Bashir hated Christians.

I heard that you were encouraged in prison to become a Muslim and that they would let you go. Do you think they would really have let you go?

I must emphasize that it was a secret service prison. I believe that they could and could abuse it properly, make it a monstrous case – we have released a European spy!

And wasn't „become a Muslim“ after all, at least somewhere in the corner, a temptation? Whatever you tell them, you leave Sudan, you remain a Christian ...

No, this was not a temptation. Precisely because I take persecution as part of life, I never asked - God, why? I was in a cell among Muslims, I could never know who would punch me in the face, who would hurt me. They prayed five times a day, and I had to kneel and look in the toilet. But I wasn't so afraid of that, I was afraid of losing my sanity. When you're malnourished, anemic, you can't sleep ... But I've believed in the power of prayer all along. It happened to me once – at 9 o'clock in the evening I lay down on the ground and suddenly I fell asleep beautifully. And then I managed to find out that in our Kladno church they agreed that at eight o'clock in the evening everyone would pray for me for an hour, wherever they were. There's an hour's shift, so they've been praying since eight o'clock, and I fell asleep at exactly nine o'clock. That's how I experienced a lot of prayer in myself. It's been so many times. When I was beaten with a stick on the head, I had Christ in front of my eyes as they beat him, I did not feel pain. Only then did I learn that they also prayed for me at home ...

How did you find out that you were to be released?

It was like this – I was just outside, in the last prison we could go out, to a kind of courtyard, I read Psalm 126 – „When the Lord changed the lot of Zion, we were like a dream ... The Lord

did great things with them.“ I finished reading it and in a few seconds the warden came up and informed me that I had been released. He said it in Arabic, everyone around burst into cheers ...

And do you think that even after this experience, you will go somewhere in such an uncertain risky area again?

We have a large network of co-workers around the world who do the same as me. I wouldn't even get a visa. And when I get a visa, there may be a trap, so I definitely have to be careful, I don't want to take any chances. Now, as an ambassador of the Christian Association, I travel to those countries that support the persecuted. I still meet persecuted Christians, but perhaps in a neighboring country. It is important that they do not endanger themselves because of my name. But it is true that last year I flew perhaps the most, with the imprisonment and then also my book, which has already been published in many countries, it is the impetus for a lot of meetings and various conferences, I am really busy. So we will see what the Lord God prepares for me, I will certainly not oppose his instructions.

Jana Plíšková

How do we make up for the cancelled Meeting of Christians in Graz 2020? Ostrava 2022!



**Christliche
BEGEGNUNGstage**
— OSTRAVA 2022 —

Due to the pandemic, the Austrian organizers had with great regret to cancel the Meeting of Christians of the Central European Region, which was planned for July 3–5, 2020 in Graz. After this difficult decision, the question arose as to how to maintain the thirty-year tradition and continuity of this event so that it would not be interrupted for eight long years. The Evangelical Church Berlin-Brandenburg had issued an invitation to another Christian Gathering in 2024.

The Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren was approached by several representatives of the participating churches asking if in the meantime it might be possible to hold a smaller Gathering in the Czech Republic, with a smaller format, to bridge the period from the 2016 Budapest Meeting to the meeting in 2024 in Frankfurt an der Oder, on the German-Polish border.

The Synodal Council of the ECCB considered the possibilities and decided to accede to this request. At present, we plan to hold a Christian Gathering in September 2022 in Ostrava. Given that our church also hosts a youth convention every year in September, we would like to combine these two big events and invite young people in the Central European region in particular to take part. At the beginning of October, the first international preparatory committee was held to discuss the programme framework, the premises and the finance for the whole event. The Preparatory Committee also decided that the motto and logo of the Gathering will be carried forward from Graz and that we will be able to use some already prepared programmes in Ostrava as well.

We believe that the circumstances will be favorable for us, we trust that the corona virus will be a thing of the past and our Gathering will be an opportunity to be grateful that we can be together and to celebrate God.

Daniela Hamrová

I am going with my head held high



Under the government of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, the 1950s were clearly the worst, the hardest.

In the nation, silence and fear, sometimes disinterest and indifference, in part, certainly, in agreement with the regime that was forced upon the nation by force; and, from above, terror, arrests, prisons, and also executions.

Of course, there have been and are many countries around the world with a much tougher regime, but in Central Europe?! But yes, the Soviet Union was not far away...

More than 260 executions were carried out in our country, but this was the only woman executed. Lawyer Milada Horáková, 70 years after her death just this year; she was executed on June 27, 1950. A victim of judicial murder during communist political trials, convicted of „conspiracy and high treason“, during the greatest tyranny of President Klement Gottwald.

However, Milada Horáková had already been imprisoned during the war. She was arrested by the Gestapo, with her husband Bohuslav, for resistance activities in the Petitions Committee in August 1940 and they were not released until April 1945. Convicted under both regimes, but the communists came out „on top“.

Milada Horáková fought her battles as a member of parliament for the National Socialists. However, as Bohuslav Horák's recollections show, the democratic forces had no chance after the war against the Czechoslovak communists, who were protected by Moscow and held in place by a handful of Soviet comrades.

The trial of Milada was a completely artificial construction, which was devised and staged by the leadership of the Communist Party, under the personal supervision of Klement Gottwald, with the direct participation of Soviet advisers. The party leadership needed to point to a fictional enemy and provide an exemplary punishment so brutal that no one would attempt real resistance.

The Communists won the May 1946 election. Many really believed in the idea of communism, and formally it was perhaps a „free“ election. However, it was voted on under the ubiquitous social pressure of the Communists, who, among other things, also controlled public information, or rather propaganda. They had already ruthlessly followed the motto „he who is not with us is against us“. As an opposition member of parliament, Milada Horáková was monitored by the secret police, and her speeches, as she travelled around her constituency in southern Bohemia, were monitored. And February 1948 marked – despite all the political charade in the background – a violent takeover of power. Armed coup. End.

Milada was arrested in September 1949; Bohuslav managed to escape from Czechoslovakia. He followed the trial in June 1950, which the communists called the „Trial of Conspiracy

against the Republic – Horáková et al.“, only through fragmentary information that reached him in the Valka refugee camp in West Germany.

This year, on the seventieth anniversary of Miladina's death, banners appeared in Prague with her likeness and the inscription „Murdered by the Communists“. One of them is also on the church wall of the Czech Brethren Evangelical Church in Prague in Smíchov, where Milada was a member.

In the letters that Milada wrote from prison in Pankrác to her closest friends in Prague just before her execution, she says: „Don't cry too much for me. I don't cry either. From the point of view of eternity, human life is actually just such a small event... In the most difficult moments, in the Terezín cells, in Principal Cell No. 8, I knew what God was and I felt that he had accepted me. And that is why you should also rely on faith in him... Do not pity me! I bear my punishment with serenity and submit to it humbly - I have stood the judgment of my conscience – and I hope and believe and I pray that I will stand the supreme judgment, God.“ And hence the phrase „I am going with my head held high“. This sentence by Milada gave the title to a book written by journalist Daniel Anýž, which focuses on US policy and transatlantic relations. Quotes from the letters are from this book. Daniel Anýž wrote the book thanks to the great help of Milada Horáková's daughter, Jana Kánská, who lives in the USA. She is now 87 years old, full of life; life, determination, and love for the truth, an inheritance from someone special.

Jana Plíšková, Daniel Anýž

The cross as a symbol of reconciliation after four hundred years



The medieval military conflict in Prague on Bílá Hora (White Mountain) in 1620 divided the Czech nation and threw it into darkness for the next one hundred and fifty years. The anniversary of the battle now offers an opportunity for a common symbolic act of reconciliation. And so, while the churches have been following the common path of ecumenical cooperation for a long time, in November 2020 a

reconciliation cross was erected on White Mountain as a permanent sign of forgiveness and mutual understanding.

The Battle of White Mountain definitively suppressed the uprising, during which the Czech states tried to achieve, among other things, religious equality between Catholics and Protestants. Instead, a period of domination and oppression came, for which the term „dark age“ has taken hold throughout history. During the violent re-Catholicization, up to half a million people went into exile, including world-famous personalities such as Jan Amos Komenský (Comenius).

After four centuries, this commemoration offers us the opportunity to deal with ancient traumas, historical injustices and the divisions of many generations. It seeks to build on what unites us, rather than on what divides us, as members of different churches.

The Cross of Reconciliation has become a permanent sign of these efforts in Bílá Hora, in the Alley of Exiles. Reconciliation crosses are part of the Czech spiritual and cultural tradition and

have been erected in places where something unfortunate has happened. A sign in the landscape as a symbol of ancient injustice and renewed understanding and forgiveness.

The modern form of this cross, whose creator is the German Benedictine Br. Abraham Fischer, refers to the deeper spiritual meaning of reconciliation, which is not only a human effort but also the work of God.

The cross is triple – it consists of two steel crosses and one titanium. The two rusted steel parts seem to represent the two warring sides of the conflict, the rust seeming to point to our sinful and conflict-filled world. The blue, titanium part, the third cross, which is not subject to environmental influences, seems to point to the heavens and to the fact that we can achieve true peace particularly when we realize that what unites outside this world unites us in it.

At the same time, the cross of reconciliation, when laid on the ground, takes the form of a barrier that prevents it from travelling. Only when it is erected and straightened by joint effort does it become a cross – a cross that is equally visible from all sides and from all angles. This cross is a sign of the reconciliation that the churches hope for and which, despite the difficulties of the past, is largely in place today.

The high point of the joint commemoration, organized by the Ecumenical Council of Churches (ERC) together with the Czech Bishops' Conference (ČBK), was to be an ecumenical vespers on Bílá Hora on the anniversary day, Sunday, November 8, and the associated pilgrimage of young people from all over the country to this place.

However, the extraordinary situation of the COVID-19 pandemic has affected things significantly. The programme has had to be severely curtailed, and the common service, which was to have been attended by hundreds of believers, was eventually changed to being a television broadcast without public participation. The Vespers also includes a penitential prayer in which church leaders confess past wounds and ask God not only for forgiveness, but also for hope for a common path to the future.

The anniversary also includes a longer-term project of the ČBK and the ERC, who together have created an expert commission to study the confessional history of the 17th century and related topics. This group regularly publishes worksheets for churches, parishes, schools and the public and organizes professional colloquia. „It is an effort to remove any prejudices that remain between us and to truly touch on the events that will lead us to the truth, because they are led in the direction of Christ. The point is for us to be closer as Christians thanks to the results of the commission's work,“ explained Daniel Ženatý, Chairman of the Ecumenical Council of Churches and Synodal Senior of the ECCB.

With the contribution of the Ecumenical Council of Churches, Jiří Hofman

On the 350th Anniversary of the Death of Jan Amos Komenský



Jan Amos Komenský, Latin Comenius, came from southeastern Moravia, from a family belonging to the Unity of Brethren. Born on March 28, 1592, the question of his birth is controversial: Nivnice or Uherský Brod are mentioned. The Comenius family had four older daughters in addition to their only son John. Comenius probably spent his childhood in both places in southeastern Moravia, and in 1598 he began

attending a Unity of Brethren school in Uherský Brod.

The future fate of Jan Amos was decided not only by his talent, but also by the need of the Unity to have educated young ministers. Therefore, he was sent abroad to study at Calvinist-oriented universities in Germany, where he spent three years (1611-14). He continued his studies at the University of Heidelberg. After returning to Moravia in 1614, Comenius began teaching at the Přerov school and in 1616 he was ordained as a minister.

Like most of the Unity of Brethren, he supported the Czech uprising against the Catholic Habsburgs. The defeat of the Czech and Moravian protestant states in the Battle of the White Mountain on November 8, 1620 thus marked his fate. At the turn of 1621/22, he was forced to leave his then place of work for fear of his freedom and life and then hide in various places in northern Moravia. The new constitution, The Renewed Establishment of the Land, in 1627 legalized the hereditary power of the Habsburgs in the Czech lands and declared Catholicism the only permitted religion. Non-Catholic were ordered either to leave the country or convert to Catholicism within six months. The result was a great wave of emigration, in which the Comenius family also went into exile.

For Comenius, Lešno in Wielkopolska became a new refuge, where he spent a total of 19 years of his life in three stays. Comenius found a second home in Leszno; he gained European fame thanks to works written in Latin, especially modern textbooks and pansophical works.

At the age of 50, Comenius was at the peak of his creative powers and there was considerable interest in his work in Europe. He even received an invitation to Paris from Cardinal Richelieu himself. Comenius's main task was to write textbooks, but his real interest was increasingly focused on the main all-correcting work, the General Council on the Redress of Human Affairs. The disaster for Jan Amos was the unfortunate news of the conclusion of the Peace of Westphalia in October 1648, which, despite Swedish promises, left the Czech lands under the control of the Habsburgs.

But even now, his vitality could not be broken by failures. His contacts with foreign countries (especially with England) continued, from whom he tried to get help for the Czech exiles. Despite the final confirmation of the Peace of Westphalia in January 1650, the Brethren Assembly decided not to dissolve the Unity of Brethren and to maintain it for the future.

In this new situation, Jan Amos Comenius welcomed the invitation of the Transylvanian Protestant princely family of Rákóczi to undertake the reform of their Latin school in Sárospatak. He thus had the opportunity to revive contacts with the exile congregation in Hungary and to try to gain new political support for the Czech exiles. He improved the local school and wrote many excellent, especially didactic, works (School through play, Orbis pictus). However, the intrigues of the rector of the school began to worsen Comenius' position in Sárospatak, so in June 1654 he decided to return to Leszno.

At that time, again and for the last time, the hopes of the Czech exiles for the reversal of Central European conditions revived. A coalition of Sweden, Cromwell's England and

Transylvania was looming on the horizon. When the Swedish-Polish war broke out in 1655, the Swedish warrior king Charles X. Gustav first celebrated great triumphs. However, soon the military tide began to turn, Polish Catholic troops attacked and burned Leszno (considered a nest of foreigners and Protestant traitors). Jan Amos and his family managed to escape at the last minute, but in the fire he lost all his property, including the library and many valuable unfinished manuscripts.

In a temporary refuge in Frankfurt an der Oder, Comenius was given an invitation to Amsterdam in June 1656; he moved to the Netherlands, permanently this time.

His fourteen-year stay in Amsterdam was a time of a final creative uplift for him (it was here that he completed and published his many literary and scientific works). However, his ideas and efforts were already moving away from the reality of the then Europe, dominated by power and economic interests. Nevertheless, even in the final years of his life, he did not cease to fulfill his duties as a bishop and maintained contact with his homeland and the Czech exiles (including by publishing his Czech books).

He died in Amsterdam on November 15, 1670, amid work on an unfinished work at the age of 78, and was buried a week later, on November 22, in the town of Naarden, 20 km southeast of Amsterdam. The final stop on Comenius' long journey was the tomb in the church of the Walloon Reformed Church, with which the deceased had a very close personal relationship.

Jaroslav Kumpere, editorially abbreviated

How is the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren inspiring and interesting for its partner churches abroad?

A German theologian answers



I.

In 1957 the Protestant Church in West Germany was rich and respected once more. I was at that time a blossoming seventeen-year-old. I had an exceptional opportunity to visit the Czech Brethren Church for the first time in June 1957. I was a member of a delegation from the Rhenish Church to the Comenius Faculty in Prague. My mother and seven other church people were actually invited. But my mother took me with her.

I came from a manse in the Rhineland. My grandfather, a well-known evangelist, my mother, one of the first women in the office of pastor, all highly respected and securely paid members of the official Protestant Church. They taught me to trust God's guidance, to ask forgiveness for my little sins, to hope to see my father again in heaven, my father who died in a Russian prisoner of war camp. And suddenly I, an inexperienced student, found myself in Chodov u Karlových Varů (Schodau by Karlovy Vary) among people who spoke a strange German. Czech farmers who had had lived in Opole in Upper Silesia for 200 years and were expelled after the end of the war in 1945. Repeat emigrants.

Now some had tears in their eyes. They crowded around us. A woman surreptitiously rubbed the fabric of my dress between her fingers. They brought me a china rose. The little church

there in the former "Egerland" was full. The local Czech pastor, Ctirad Novák, sat next to me in the pew, he didn't have to preach today; for the first time in twelve years the words of God were heard, from our delegation, in German from the pulpit.

It was then, in June 1957, that my life took a decisive turn. I learned that people suffered for Christ's sake. There was no reputation, no money, no honour to being a member of a church. Rather, it brought tears. We travelled as far as Bratislava - and it was a similar story everywhere: modestly dressed men and women talked about their needs as pastors. Where 40 young people had been confirmed in the previous year, only three came this year. Where two wardens used to take care of the church, the pastor had to get up twice on Sunday night in winter to put coal into the stove in the church. Travel to Germany for the Kirchentag? Exit prohibited! Send the child to high school? Locked out! Pastor Novák in Chodov recently reported: menacing men from the State Security kept visiting the manse, even after our visit in 1957. They wanted to know everything about this delegation from the Rhineland: who was behind it?

I wondered how God could be so unjust. We here, as Christians in the West, had everything. Everything. And there an economy of shortages, yes, never-ending persecution, for fifty years. There people had to suffer for Christ's sake... because Moscow wanted it that way.

This willingness to sacrifice oneself for God, which still animated Bonhoeffer, is missing in the German churches today.

Power killed your Hus, hounded out your Comenius (not other mighty ones, however, not the church secretaries of socialism). But you Bohemian and Moravian Christians have remained loyal to this day. In this we can use your inspiration and your role model.

II.

Because times are about to change. The reputation of the churches in Germany is shrinking rapidly. Wealth is at risk. Where the parishioners squeeze into the pews on Christmas Eve, from January 2nd there will again be frighteningly few. And for these few, the Czech Brethren Church can be a new source of inspiration. Because that church knows how the Spirit of God can stay alive in small groups, even in hidden circles.

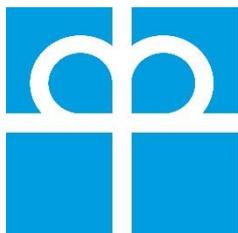
The Germans are slowly moving from the national and state church to a denominational church. This path has made almost no one suffer. But here and there a pastor sighs with disappointment when her carefully prepared invitations to parish meetings come to nothing. The Corona restrictions made us very equal in West and East: are we still allowed to sing in church services? No. Or through masks? No. So, sisters and brothers, how do you do it? Last Sunday the pastor and organist said all the beautiful old chorales solo. And with you?

What do we have to learn from you?

Getting along with little money as a church. Having Bible discussions in small groups. Appreciating one another: everyone in the community. Being happy to be with each other ... as far as Corona allows. Above all: helping each other. The pastor greets his people on Sundays and knows that it is Mrs. Weidenpesch's birthday today and that Mrs. Krämer came home from the hospital yesterday. To study as much as possible with the members of other churches, with the Catholics, with the members of the synagogue community, about what is in Holy Scriptures and what it might actually mean. We few Christians will radiate out into the world. Perhaps then I will find the strength again to take out my robe and preach. And the preaching tabs I put on will be embroidery from Javornik, a present to my mother in 1957.

Dorothea Kuhrau-Neumärker

DIACONIA OF THE ECCB



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The Diaconia of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren (ECCB) is a Christian non-profit organisation that offers help and support for living a dignified and full life despite age, illness, disability, isolation, difficult social situations or other forms of crisis situations that occur in life. The services of the ECCB's Diaconia are based on the message of the Gospel about the Love of our Lord and the example that Jesus Christ has given us in serving others. In its centres and special educational facilities, the ECCB's Diaconia offers social and educational services, healthcare, and ministry. It is the second largest non-governmental organisation providing social services in the Czech Republic.

Community is important to me

Talking with the director of Diakonia ČCE about spiritual care, the tasks of Diakonia, and also about one ideology



Jan Soběslavský has been associated with Diakonia since university studies, as he helped the organization with legal advice. After graduating from law and theology, he was successful in an interview for the post of Director of Diakonia in Brno and held this position for ten years. He is in his third year as the director of the ECCB Diakonie.

You have been working at Diakonia for 15 years. How has it changed in that time?

It has changed a lot. I think that I myself contributed to this, especially in the area of professionalisation of management. In the 1990s, everything in Diakonia worked somehow „on its knees“. In the field of human resources, finance, communication and investment, Diakonia did not have any rules that should be followed. But thanks to the efforts of many people, this has changed over time, and I am glad that we now have rules that work today. But in some ways, Diaconia has remained the same, and it's good - in the willingness to help people, to work with commitment, to do interesting things, to do what makes sense. It is up to us now to be able to manage Diakonia professionally while leaving it with a non-profit spirit.

What are your plans for Diakonia in the coming years?

My thoughts are now moving a lot towards spiritual care. Humanity is a bio-psycho-socio-cultural being, I think, who needs to pay attention to the spiritual dimension. All the more so in situations where we find ourselves in difficult living conditions, for example due to, social situation, our own illness or that of our loved ones, etc.

So is it about more clergy working in Diaconia?

The topic goes even further. Diaconia is not made up of chic-minded people, but two thousand employees who certainly think of spiritual care, and it is certain that the thoughts of us all will not be the same. Thinking about it together will be very interesting, exciting and at the same time a bit controversial. But I think that the discussion that awaits us will lead to the improvement of our services.

How?

I will try to explain it with an example. One of the big topics in social services is that one should constantly „move“ here. Imagine, for example, a person with a psychiatric illness who is in a hospital. The vision of social workers is that this person's condition will continue to improve. This means that they will go from the hospital to sheltered housing, then move to supported housing and ideally end up as a single person who has a job and lives a normal life. But it has always struck me about how many of us would take the opportunity to keep moving. I wonder to what extent this is human, and to what extent it is just an ideology permeating our civilization. In our case, this may mean that sheltered housing is a border for a person with a psychological disorder that we should not cross. There is no need to constantly stress people with the necessity of development and relocation. When we force people to do so, they get into a circle of various failures, at the end of which there is again a treatment centre, from where they then have to „move“ again. And we try not to do this in Diakonia. We respect the clients and think about them, which is logically reflected in the way we provide our services.

However, Diaconia will have to deal with more mundane things. For example, a lot will be built.

Reconstruction of a special school for children and young people with disabilities in Prague awaits us, we are preparing for a major investment in the centre in Valašské Meziříčí and we are starting to build two new homes for the elderly, in Svitavy and Nové Město na Moravě. I will take advantage of the fact that the building for the home for the elderly in Nosislav, which we built about five years ago, is behind me. We thought about it a lot because we wanted the clients who would live there to live the most normal life possible. Most residential services work in a hotel way, where people are served everything, everything is done for them. But we wanted to create a more community way of living, where clients participate in garden work, help with food preparation, and together with the staff take care of the house. At that time, this concept was not completely common in our country, but it turned out to be necessary. And our clients really like it. Residential services in the spirit of a community way of life are proving themselves and we want to introduce them in our two new homes for the elderly.

What other tasks does Diaconia face?

The theme that I also carry in my head is Diaconia as an environmentally responsible organization. Think about what we can do in social services so that we are as environmentally friendly as possible. We all probably perceive the drought in the landscape, global warming and the situation around the plastic economy. And it is clear that, like households and factories, social services also burden the environment, so we would like to adjust their operation so that the burden is as small as possible.

Imagine being able to give Diakonia the only ideal thing or service. What would that be?

It would certainly be well-practiced personnel work. I imagine that the staff of Diakonia not only follow a manual that dictates exactly what to do, but also reserves some space for free development, in which work makes them happy and in which they can realize their dreams and ideas. And if there was such a Diaconia, and I believe it is partly there already, and managed to make this felt by all the more than 2,000 employees, then I would feel that I had given her the best possible gift as a director.

And as for the clients, I don't really see them in any separate way. For me, community is important, which is one of the values of Diaconia. If I am a 30-year-old man with a disability who lives in sheltered housing, where I can live according to my ideas as much as I can with my disability, then I am part of the Diaconia, in which I have my place. And those employees are my partners and share space with me. This is how I think about Diakonia.

Adam Šůra

Diaconia helps people with disabilities in Beirut



Proceeds from the Diaconal Lent Collection enabled very rapid relief after the tragic and devastating explosion in Beirut, Lebanon. The explosion killed more than 220 people and left 6,000 injured. It left about 300,000 people without a roof over their head.

On the afternoon of Tuesday, August 4, an ammonium nitrate port depot exploded in the Lebanese capital, Beirut. The port, which is a key place in the country's economy and supply, has been completely destroyed. For example, the silo contained 85% of Lebanon's wheat reserves. Four Beirut hospitals, which were helping manage the onslaught of the covid-19 pandemic, were also put out of commission.

At the same time, Lebanon has been facing a deep economic crisis for a long time. Pandemics and explosions have now exacerbated it and escalated it hugely.

ECCB Diakonie sent immediate aid in the amount of 800 thousand crowns and at the same time opened a public fundraiser. It is dedicated not only to dealing with the immediate consequences, but also to longer-term support for the people of Beirut. Diaconia supportive projects have been taking place in Lebanon for several years, including care for vulnerable

Beirut families. They help them cope with the dire consequences of poverty and help those who have fled the war in Syria.

The local knowledge and long-term operation of Diakonia in Beirut then helped to distribute resources really quickly and efficiently. Just under half the money (340 thousand CZK) will help the poorest families in the most affected district of Karantina.

The Beirut Tahaddi Training Centre, which has been cooperating with Diakonia for a long time, will also join in dealing with the consequences. Young people will help with the cleaning up after the explosion, and graduates trained in the fields of carpentry, plumbing and painting will also help with the restoration. Other young people will prepare and deliver food for families, workers and volunteers.

The second part of the money, CZK 220,000, will be used to purchase basic teaching aids for children from the poorest families. Due to the sharp increase in covid-19 cases in recent weeks, schools are expected to remain closed and only online lessons will be available for children.

School, combined with small but regular food or financial assistance, serves in many cases as the main prevention of child labour, early marriage of girls or other negative phenomena. It helps to prevent children from becoming stuck in the long run in a never-ending loop of poverty; and it provides the immediate feeling and benefits of simply being a child.

The third part, in the amount of CZK 240,000, has been donated by Diakonie to support teaching and other children's activities as needed for psychosocial assistance.

The ECCB Diaconate in Lebanon, in cooperation with local organizations, supports the operation of school, kindergarten, a medical centre, and provides material and psychosocial assistance to the poorest, who would not otherwise have access to these basic services. The Tahaddi Community Centre offers material assistance as well as a long-term work for change, although at present it is primarily a matter of immediate survival. It employs two dozen women in a social enterprise tailoring company and provides quality education and leisure activities to 450 children who would not otherwise have a chance to go to school at all.

Jiří Hofman

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The Protestant Theology Faculty of Charles University (PTF) is the successor of the Jan Hus Faculty (1919–1950) and the Comenius Faculty (1950–1990). In the year 1990 it was incorporated into Charles University. The administration of the Faculty is directed by a Dean and a board of Vice-Deans, elected for a four-year term of office. The Faculty offers study programmes at Bachelor's and Master's level in Protestant Theology, Diaconia (Pastoral and Social Work), and Ecumenical Studies, and at doctoral level in various theological fields. The faculty is ecumenically open to all. Pastors of the ECCB receive their theological education here.

„Ecumenical“ orientation programme for incoming Erasmus students at Prague theology faculties

Protestant and Catholic Theological Faculties join forces



Every year incoming Erasmus exchange students at the Protestant Theological Faculty of Charles University (PTF) can look forward to a two-week orientation programme immediately before the start of the winter semester organised by the PTF International Office. In addition to practical and administrative information about their stay in Prague (registering as students, choosing and enrolling for courses, using public transport, healthcare and insurance, etc.) the programme also includes an intensive beginners' course in the Czech language (four hours every morning), and visits to places of cultural and historical interest in Prague.

This year, because of the coronavirus pandemic, so few Erasmus students registered to come to study theology or social work at PTF that the International Office considered shortening the orientation programme or cancelling it altogether. Eventually, however, they had the idea of holding a joint orientation programme together with the Catholic Theological Faculty (CTF). Colleagues at the CTF were happy to do this because they, too, were expecting much fewer students than usual, so the idea went ahead. At a time when the number of covid cases in the Czech Republic was still quite low and government measures to combat the spread of the virus were not yet very strict, PTF students and CTF students were able to join together to prepare

for their studies, gain a basic knowledge of Czech, visit places such as the Jewish Quarter and St Agnes' Monastery in Prague, and go on a daytrip along the Elbe Valley.

The project was very successful, with the students making friends from another faculty and CTF and PTF staff also getting to know each other better. As a result, PTF students decided to attend some courses at the CTF, and vice versa. It is quite likely that the experiment will be repeated again next year.

So in spite of all the problems and disruption caused by the pandemic, it has at least had one positive and unexpected result: strengthening ecumenical cooperation in Prague!

Peter Stephens