

Seventy Years of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren (1918-88)

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In December 1988 the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren (ECCB) celebrated 70 years of existence. Founded in 1918, shortly after the proclamation of the first independent Czechoslovak state (28 October 1918), the new church traces its roots back to the 15th century and the beginnings of the church reform movement in Bohemia, associated with Jan Hus.

The creation of the ECCB, which brought together 126,000 Reformed Christians and 34,000 Lutherans,¹ came at an historically opportune time. The First World War and subsequent collapse of the Hapsburg Empire ended a long period of Austro-Hungarian domination of the Czech and Slovak peoples. In the aftermath of these events, and following the establishment of a democratic Czechoslovakia, the Roman Catholic Church, long associated in the minds of Czechs with Hapsburg rule, lost considerable support. An estimated 18 per cent of Czechs were to abandon it as the 'Away from Rome' movement spread, and 100,000 former Roman Catholics joined the ECCB in its early years.

This movement was paralleled in Czechoslovakia by a growing awareness of the Hussite and Brethren traditions and their influence on Czech national identity. In recognition of this, and as a sign of its ecumenical base, the ECCB later adopted the old Hussite and Brethren confessions in addition to the Augsburg and Helvetian.

Today membership of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren stands at just 200,000. It is the third largest non-Catholic church in Czechoslovakia, after the Hussite (formerly Czechoslovak) and Lutheran Churches, with 230 parishes (plus 380 preaching stations) and just over 200 pastors. An estimated 65 parishes are currently vacant and 18 pastors are without a state licence to minister.²

¹Dr Jiří Otter, Secretary of Synodical Council, *Evangelische Kirche der Boehmischen Brueder in der CSSR* (ECCB Synodical Council: Prague, 1968).

²'Czechoslovakia', in *World Christianity: Eastern Europe*, edited by Philip Walters (Eastbourne, 1988), p. 187.

Church Organisation

The ECCB is a presbyterian church, i.e. one governed by elders and clergy on equal terms. Each congregation is run by a church session, and office bearers are elected for a four-year term of office (formerly six years). Congregations elect their own ministers who normally serve a minimum of five years. Men and women are equal within the church and currently 30 ministers are women.

The church is run on a synodical basis, and is divided into 13 seniorates, or presbyteries, comprising on average 20 parishes. At the head of each seniorate is the Seniorate Council, which has four members (two pastors and two members of the laity) and is presided over by a Senior or moderator.

The highest church body is the General Assembly, or Synod, which meets every two years (until 1969 every three years) to discuss issues of importance for the church and to make decisions on church policy. Equal numbers of delegates represent the clergy and eldership on the Synod. In addition, three representatives of the staff of the Comenius Protestant Theological Faculty and members of the Synodical Council have voting rights. Between synods permanent delegates meet twice yearly.

The Synodical Council — composed of three pastors and three elders — is responsible for the administration of the church between synods. It is elected by the Synod and answers to it. From its Prague headquarters the Council oversees work in a number of departments, including those concerned with evangelism, publications and Christian service.

The ECCB has its own publishing house and bookshop *Kalich* (*The Chalice*) and produces a monthly magazine *Česky bratr* (*Czech Brother*). For clergy there is a regular theological publication *Křestanská revue* (*Christian Review*). In addition to these the church contributes to the Czech Protestant interdenominational weekly newspaper, *Kostnické jiskry* (*Sparks of Constance*). Lastly the ECCB produces annually a church handbook containing prayers and reflections, as well as general information on churches and services.

Church ministers train at the Comenius Theological Faculty in Prague, an establishment separate from Prague University, and shared with the other Protestant denominations, excepting the Lutheran church. The course takes five years and includes the study of Marxism-Leninism. Teachers are selected by the state. Those candidates who successfully complete their studies are assigned to parishes where they gain practical experience before becoming fully qualified. However, successful completion of the theological and practical aspects of training does not guarantee the candidate work as

a minister. The ultimate decision as to which candidates qualify rests with the Regional State Secretary for Church Affairs.

The Church under Communism, 1948-68

By the time the Communist Party assumed power in Czechoslovakia in 1948, the ECCB was firmly established. Not only had the church survived the Second World War and the Nazi occupation, when several of its ministers perished in concentration camps, its membership had actually increased from a pre-war total of 325,000. After the liberation of Czechoslovakia in 1945 Czech Protestant emigres in Silesia, Poland and Ukraine returned to their homeland, revitalising old congregations and setting up new ones in border areas.

The ECCB's attitude towards the new conditions after 1948 was ambivalent. On the one hand past repression had instilled in Czech Protestants a profound distrust of state authorities. On the other, the Evangelical Church with its concern for social issues found little to object to in socialist ideals, which were anyway expected to lead to a fairer restructuring of society. However, when the new ruling party proclaimed Marxism as its leading principle and atheism as the only valid worldview, the church's mission to proclaim the Gospel was threatened. Furthermore, shortly after it came to power the party had passed church-state laws which, while guaranteeing a degree of financial support to the churches, severely curtailed their autonomy. Many church members now opposed the new socialist order, whilst others resigned themselves to the changed conditions. Miloslav Hajek, until November 1987 the Synodical Senior of the ECCB, recently recalled his church's reaction to the communist takeover:

One must admit that the sweep of events terrified us. . . Those who remember that time will recall the panic-stricken sermons after the incidents in February — it was during the Lenten session of the church year and from many a pulpit the Lenten lament was mixed with a lament over the end of our democracy.³

One of those who came quickly to accept the new order was the well-respected theologian Professor Josef Hromádka (1889-1969). Hromádka regarded the birth of socialism in Czechoslovakia with 'sober Christian realism'. The church, he said, stood 'amid great historical changes' which could not be sidestepped. It could, of course, ignore the new situation and look to its past, 'but such an attitude to the problems of today would weaken us spiritually, would

³Miloslav Hajek, 'Unor 1948' *Česky Bratr*, 1988 No. 2.

withdraw the church to the fringe of events'.⁴ Hromádka therefore advocated dialogue with the Marxists, arguing that the Marxist revolution was a revolt against unjust social orders, not against God. As Professor of Systematic Theology at the Hussite (later renamed Comenius) Theological Faculty, Hromádka was part of an Action Committee set up by the church in 1948 to respond to the changed situation. This committee welcomed the new government, anticipating that it would 'preserve the deepest traditions of freedom and justice' in Czechoslovakia.⁵

Hromádka's concerns with the church's role in a secularised society, its relationship to the world, ecumenism and the peace issue influenced a number of his students. In the 1960s some of these formed a group within the ECCB. Known as the New Orientation, this movement of young clergy and lay intellectuals stressed that the church's role in society should be active and creative, and it initiated a move away from the use of religious terminology in sermons. Although the New Orientation also counted amongst its members some of Hromádka's most devout disciples — Jan Šimsa, Jan Čapek, Jakub Trojan and Ladislav Hejdánek — it did not always agree with his approach and criticised him for failing to raise with political leaders the ideological and practical mistakes of the party, as well as the need of the church for more independence. Hromádka, while he remained sympathetic towards the aims of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, was not always an uncritical admirer of its policies. Though seldom criticising the party in public, throughout the period of severest repression in the 1950s he often wrote to government ministers and officials questioning the government's policies. In 1958 he publicly protested to the Central Committee at the obligation on teachers in Czechoslovakia to educate their pupils in atheism.

Hromádka's interest in establishing common ground between Christians and Marxists resulted in 1958 in the founding of the Prague Christian Peace Conference, an ecumenical and international forum which in its early years did much to initiate dialogue. Yet it was not until the late 1960s, in the new atmosphere of greater freedom, that Christian-Marxist dialogue began in earnest in Czechoslovakia. Clergy and lay Christians who had been imprisoned were released and rehabilitated in the early 1960s. In 1968 censorship was relaxed, allowing the church press more leeway and independence of the state, and many public meetings were held to promote discussion on the church's role in communist society. The new freedoms were

⁴J. L. Hromádka, *The Church and Theology in Today's Troubled Times* (Prague, 1956).

⁵R. Řičan, *50 let Komenského evangelické bohoslovecké fakulty v Praze*, p. 54. Quoted in Dorothea Neumärker, *Josef L. Hromádka, Theologie und Politik in Kontext des Zeitgeschehens* (Munich: 1974), p. 120.

shortlived. By August 1968 Czechoslovakia had been invaded by five of her Warsaw Pact allies and soon afterwards a new, conservative government assumed power. Hromádka was deeply shocked and disillusioned by the Soviet-led invasion, not just because this was a violation of Czechoslovakia's sovereignty, but because of his personal esteem for the Soviet Union. In a letter handed to the Soviet Ambassador in Prague on 22 August 1968 he described the occupation as 'the greatest tragedy of my life'. Hromádka was now forced to reconsider his faith in the Soviet Union, even his firmly-held socialist convictions. In a memorandum to the Christian Peace Conference of October 1968 Hromádka asked: 'What appeal can socialism hold for man if it neglects his deepest desires and his struggle for a full human life?' In his profound disillusionment Hromádka even questioned the role of the Christian Peace Conference, the body set up to promote dialogue, in this 'new historical situation'. 'Will we find a common language in the future?', he asked.⁶

Hromádka's doubts were not exaggerated. The CPC found itself after the Warsaw Pact invasion under increasing pressure from the invading nations, in particular the Soviet Union. Then in 1969 Dr J. N. Ondra, Secretary-General of the CPC, who like Hromádka had welcomed the Prague Spring, was dismissed from his post. Ondra's removal came as a great blow to Hromádka who died soon afterwards. Dr Hromádka's belief in the possibility of a Christian-Marxist dialogue was largely discredited after 1968. Indeed one of the professor's former students was to charge Hromádka with 'leading Czech Protestantism to moral disintegration, spiritual and political slough', by his positive attitude towards communism in the USSR and at home. Any attempts at continuing dialogue between the churches and the regime were soon abandoned.

The ECCB was quick to respond to the news of occupation. On 21 August 1968, the day Soviet tanks rolled into Prague, the Synodical Council sent a letter to all congregations supporting Czechoslovakia's 'struggle for renewal' and protesting 'in the name of our whole church' against this infringement of the nation's sovereignty. The letter also demanded that foreign armies stationed in Czechoslovakia be recalled.

This was followed on 31 October by a declaration from the Union of ECCB clergy demanding the complete withdrawal of occupation forces and calling on the government to implement its planned reformist policies. Amongst these were: freedom of association, the equality of Christians in society and the maintenance of a Christian-Marxist dialogue.

⁶J. L. Hromádka, *The Situation in Czechoslovakia*, (Memorandum to the CPC Congress: Paris, 1-4 October 1968).

The Church under New Conditions

In the first two months of 1969 two ECCB declarations were issued one entitled 'On the Internal Political Situation', from the Union of ECCB clergy, the other the 16th Synod's *Synod svému národu* ('The Synod to the People'). Although both statements are critical of the continued presence of occupation armies in Czechoslovakia, the Synod preaches a message of forgiveness for wrongs done: 'The Church has no choice but to carry Christ's message of reconciliation to all peoples, not excluding the five (Warsaw Pact) nations.' The Union of Clergy in its declaration also recorded disquiet at 'attempts at reimposing and gradually increasing censorship'. At the end of 1968 attempts were made to re-establish state control of all publications, especially political and cultural newspapers and magazines under a new law, No. 127/1968. Yet despite state censorship both declarations appeared in *Kostnické jiskry*, the official weekly newspaper of Czech Protestants.⁷

It was not until two years later that the content of the church declarations came under attack from the state authorities who began criminal proceedings against members of the clergy suspected of distributing copies. In June 1972 an ECCB pastor, Jan Dus, stood trial indicted under Paragraph 100 of the Czechoslovak Criminal Code (Incitement) for allegedly distributing articles 'attacking the socialist order'. Proceedings against him had begun in June 1970 when police ripped a copy of the Synod's 1969 declaration from a notice board outside Dus' church. It had been hanging there for a year. As a result Dus lost his licence to minister and received a two-year suspended prison sentence.

Similarly Rev. Vlastimil Sláma, Chairman of the Union of Clergy, was brought to trial on the grounds that he sent to Berlin copies of both church declarations. Sláma received a three-month prison sentence and also lost his licence to minister. The Chairman's conviction marked the beginning of the end of the Union of Clergy. During a raid on Sláma's home, police confiscated, amongst other things, a paper given to the Union in 1971 by Rev. Miloš Rejchrt. This ended with a proposal that the ECCB withdraw from the Christian Peace Conference as the CPC had purged its own hierarchy of those who disagreed with the invasion of Czechoslovakia. The paper was accepted by 80 votes to two. At Sláma's trial Rejchrt's paper was presented to the court as proof of the subversive nature of the Union. Three times the government demanded that the Union expel those of its members who had no state licence. When the Union refused for the third time, it was abolished.

⁷ *Kostnické jiskry*, 5 March 1969 No. 10 and 5 February 1969 No. 6.

In 1969 Karel Hruza, who had been Director of the Secretariat for Church Affairs until the Prague Spring, was reappointed to the top position. Under these new conditions of increased state control the ECCB struggled to maintain a degree of independence. At the Synod of October 1971 three documents were prepared for submission to the government. These called for an amnesty for all those imprisoned for their beliefs in Czechoslovakia, for an end to attacks on churches and individuals and for honest and sincere dialogue between the churches and the government. The Synod also passed 52 resolutions, one of which expressed concern over the case of Jan Dus and 'regret' at the likelihood of his standing trial. The Synodical Council was charged with conveying to the relevant state bodies the church's concern.

Yet just a few months later on 11 February 1972, the Synodical Council displayed an attitude remarkably different from that of the 17th Synod. In a memorandum to all presbyterian councils, elders and clergy the Council not only avoided any criticism of the government's church policy but went as far as to make its own implicit condemnation of church members who have 'come into conflict with the law'. No names were mentioned but, in addition to Dus and Sláma, the Council probably had in mind the philosopher Ladislav Hejdínek and Rev. Jaromir Dus, both of whom were at the time awaiting trial on charges of 'Subversion'. They had allegedly duplicated and distributed leaflets urging a boycott of the 1971 elections because these did not offer voters a free choice.

The Synodical Council's memorandum made reference to a 'particularly important exchange' between church and government in 1972. The government, it said, was critical of the ECCB for 'behaving as it did in 1968-69'. In particular the Synod's message of 1969 to the people was considered by the state authorities as decidedly political and, 'in view of current events, as a negative pronouncement'. The authorities also regarded the letter to the President of the Republic calling for a general amnesty as 'a political act'. The memorandum then apparently advocated that ministers apply self-censorship, advising them to 'weigh carefully every word and action' and to 'remember that their well-intentioned pronouncements may not always be correctly understood'.

The degree to which the church leadership was willing to comply with the wishes of the government became clearer at the October 1973 Synod. Under pressure from the government, which wanted to see it retracted, the Synod heard a request that it reconsider its 1969 proclamation *Synod svému národu*. But members of the New Orientation group of clergy, who were amongst the initiators of the letter in 1969, were determined that it should not now be retracted. After much discussion the Synod finally settled on a declaration

stating that the church had something relevant to say in every situation, as it did in 1969. The 1973 Synod caused controversy in the church and a split within the clergy between those who wanted the 1969 declaration retracted and those who reproached the Synod for conforming too much to the wishes of the state authorities. Neither did the declaration lead to improved church-state relations. The regime continued its attack on ECCB clergy, particularly members of the New Orientation. Amongst those affected were Revs. Trojan and Kocáb, who lost their state licences in January 1974.

The dismissal of Trojan and Kocáb prompted 22 students of the Comenius Theological Faculty to write to the Secretariat for Church Affairs deploring the action and calling for the reinstatement of these and other ministers. The faculty leaders and State Secretariat were shaken by the students' outburst and launched an enquiry into who was responsible for it. The students, however, insisted their action had not been organised from outside, that they merely wished to express their anxiety at possibly being barred from exercising their vocation. Of the 22 students, 17 were persuaded by the Faculty Council to sign a declaration of loyalty to the socialist regime. Three others were expelled and two refused a state licence on completion of their studies.

The ECCB and Charter '77

On 1 January 1977 a human rights manifesto, Charter '77, was launched in Czechoslovakia. Of the Charter's 241 initial signatories, six were pastors of the ECCB. In an open letter entitled 'Our Attitude to the Charter '77 Statement', dated January 1977, the six ECCB clergymen, Milan Balabán, Alfred Kocáb, Miloš Rejchrt, Svatopluk Karásek, Jan Šimsa and Jakub Trojan, explained why they signed the manifesto:

Even though Charter '77 does not speak about God or God's kingdom it is fighting for freedom in religious matters and in this it serves God's purposes. It calls attention to acute problems in our society and sees them in all their breadth and urgency [. . .] We do not see anything exceptional in the fact that we signed Charter '77. We believe that it is as much an expression of service to our fellow men as are such activities as responsible Bible teaching, free preaching, persuasive prayer or helping the needy [. . .]⁸

The ECCB Synodical Council had not even seen the manifesto, let alone discussed it, when on 15 January 1977 *Rudé pravó*, the

⁸Quoted in *RCL* Vol. 5 No. 3 (1977), pp. 161-62.

Communist Party daily, printed the Synodical Council's condemnation of this 'defamatory pamphlet'.⁹ A statement by the ECCB Synodical Council printed two weeks later in *Kostnické jiskry*, and circulated to pastors in Bohemia and Moravia, attempted to rectify the impression created by *Rudé pravó*:

Like other citizens of our state we learned yesterday from an article in *Rudé pravó* of the existence of a proclamation entitled Charter '77. At its meeting on 13 January the Synodical Council stated that it did not know the contents of this proclamation. None of its members or officials was asked to sign this proclamation, and none of them has signed it. The Synodical Council stresses that, together with the representatives of other churches, it has expressed its positive attitude towards our nation, state and system several times in the past months.¹⁰

Subsequently the Synodical Senior, Dr Vaclav Kejř, who had signed the ECCB statement came under increasing pressure from the government. For a time Dr Kejř was interrogated daily and asked to expel from his church all those pastors who had signed Charter '77. He refused on the grounds that excommunication is not possible within the ECCB. But the church eventually gave in to the pressure. On 20 March 1977 the Synodical Board at an extraordinary meeting called by the Synodical Council allowed itself to be drawn into the campaign against the Charter when it ordered that 'pastors desist from this antisocial action, uphold order and do not become involved in politics'.

A further challenge to the church leadership came on 7 May 1977 when 31 ECCB members, including Charter signatories, sent a letter to the Federal Assembly of the Czechoslovak republic in which they called for a guarantee of the free development of church life. The writers stressed that theirs was a civil initiative, unrelated to 'the attempts of the Synodical Council to improve church-state relations by frequent discussions'. Appended to the letter was a document entitled *Postavení církve a věřících*, ('The Position of the Church and Believers'). After a brief description of the ECCB, its organisation and presbyterian principles, there followed a list of nine areas of church life which had suffered under the state-imposed atheist ideology. Among these were: pastoral work and congregational life, church publishing, youth work, ecumenical activity, assemblies and synods. Congregational meetings were restricted to Sundays, with occasional Bible classes during the week, the clear intention being,

⁹ *Rudé právo*, 15 January 1977 No. 12, pp. 1-2.

¹⁰ *Kostnické jiskry*, 26 January 1977, p. 3. Quoted in *RCL*, Vol. 5 No. 3 (1977), pp. 148-57.

according to the document, 'to limit church activity to agreed services in the church building'. Ministers had to have state licences for any clerical work, including teaching at the Comenius Theological Faculty. Fear of losing their licence prevented many ministers from speaking openly at church meetings. Conventions and synods are very important to the ECCB and formulate through debate and resolution the direction and standpoints of the church. Yet the signatories claimed that the 1969, 1971, 1973 and 1975 Conventions and Synods were all observed by regional and district State Secretaries for Church Affairs. They further claimed that government pressure was particularly concentrated on the concluding resolutions of these Synods and that the state authorities knew the contents of the resolution before the delegates did. Under pressure from the authorities some pastors made speeches echoing the government line at important church meetings, and only licensed pastors could, at government insistence, be elected to church bodies. Youth work was severely restricted: *Bratrstvo* (*Brotherhood*), the ECCB's youth magazine, was obliged to stop publication in 1975 because the other state-recognised churches had no equivalent, and the Brigade of Evangelical Youth, which ran summer work camps, was banned by the government after 25 years in operation. Children's religious education had to take place within the school where religion was discredited by atheist teaching. The document told how in 1971 the school authorities intimidated children enrolled for religious instruction, and how a pastor, Rev. Brodsky, lost his licence in 1975 for entertaining at his home 12 former students of the Comenius Faculty. As far as training for the ministry was concerned, the document revealed that candidates must have the approval of the local government Secretary for Church Affairs, and that the Ministry of Culture sets the faculty's annual intake. This was generally insufficient to meet the church's need for new clergy.

The Synodical Council's response to the letter of the 31 ECCB members was to circulate among the church bodies a letter naming Dr Jakub Trojan as one of the letter's main initiators and linking the ECCB letter to Charter '77. This circular provoked an angry reaction from a number of the 31 signatories, of whom 16 were ECCB ministers. On 25 July they wrote to the Synodical Council rejecting its attempts to make a scapegoat of Dr Trojan and denying that Charter '77 had sponsored the letter.

Indirect criticism of the Charter initiative and the letter came also from the lecturers at the Comenius Faculty. On 24 May 1977 they wrote:

The ECCB is confronted with the results of a year-long effort to drag the church into the political arena and force it to express opinions and make comments and statements which are not theologically justified. Moreover these fail to take account of the socialist, social and political conditions in which we live!

The thrust of this letter, and that of the Synodical Council, is that the message of the Gospel must not be mixed up with politics, because politics fall within the authorities' jurisdiction. Dr Božena Komarková, a philosopher and active ECCB member, rejects this outlook in *Difficile Est*, her response (written in July 1977) to the statements of the Synodical Council and Comenius Faculty. According to Komarková, the state authorities had 'after a five-year assault on the Synodical Council finally succeeded in making it the instrument of internal division within the church'. She described the Synodical Council as the 'state's long arm', whose duty is to implement state decisions. In this way the Synodical Council is endowed with an authority which it would not normally have in a reformed church. Komarková attacked the conformism of the Synodical Council, which she accused of adding its own censorship of the press to that of the state:

The Synodical Council has strengthened its influence on the church through circulars to all congregations which, on its insistence, are read out from the pulpit. All these authoritarian measures are a sign of the moral weakness of the church leadership, its uncertainty and fear and result in the abandoning of the reformist spirit to safeguard institutional authority.

Although Charter '77 was not openly condemned by the church leadership, ECCB members who had signed the manifesto received no support from church bodies. In June 1979 22 ECCB members wrote to the Christian Peace Conference Assembly in Prague with a list of their brethren and Charter '77 supporters unfairly imprisoned at that time and requesting support. Amongst those mentioned were Revs. Jan Šimsa, arrested in May 1978 and sentenced the following August to eight months' imprisonment for allegedly attacking a police officer during a raid on his home, and Miroslav Lojek, sentenced in April 1978 to 13 months' for having distributed the Charter '77 text. The letter also mentioned two theology students and Charter signatories, Aleš Březina and František Matula, expelled from the Comenius Faculty on political grounds and sentenced to two and a half and two years' detention respectively for conscientious objection to military service.

Many other ECCB pastors have had significant problems in

exercising their vocation since signing the Charter. Miloš Rejchrt lost his state licence in 1972 after criticising the Christian Peace Conference in a lecture given the previous year to the Union of ECCB Clergy. In 1978 the Synodical Council recommended that Rejchrt have his licence returned and approved his candidature to a congregation. However, at its first meeting in 1979, the Council retracted its recommendation on the grounds that Rejchrt had become a spokesman for Charter '77. Since that time he has been employed as a stoker. Rev. Tomáš Bísek lost his parish in May 1982 because of his 'personal contact with representatives of Charter '77 and VONS [*Výbor na nespravedlivě stíhaných* — The Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Persecuted], or their relatives'. A Synodical Council appeal against the decision of the Regional People's Committee and recommendation that Bísek instead be transferred to another parish failed to secure the return of his state licence. Finally, under pressure from the authorities, the Bísek family was forced to leave Czechoslovakia in 1985.

In a few cases the ECCB leadership has intervened with the state authorities on behalf of pastors who have lost their licences, as in the case of Rev. Bísek. Rev. Jan Keller, a Charter signatory, lost his licence in January 1984. Keller had allegedly held a week-long youth meeting for prayer and worship in his parish in August 1983. He was as a result charged with 'Obstructing State Supervision of the Church', under Art. 178 of the Criminal Code. In November 1985 the ECCB Synod discussed Keller's case and requested the Synodical Council to support the minister's work with young people. Rev. Keller was tried and acquitted in 1986, but his minister's licence has yet to be returned.

Refusal to distance themselves from Charter '77, rather than membership of it, may yet cost two assistant ministers their licences. Zvonimir Šorm and Pavel Pokorný, both employed in the Eastern Bohemian district, had friends in Charter '77 and other independent groups. In 1988 both were requested by their local state Secretary for Church Affairs to cut their connections with independent activists. They refused on the grounds that the activities of the independent groups are not illegal. Their state licences were to be withdrawn on 1 April 1989 but, following protests from their parishioners and an appeal by the ECCB Synodical Council, they have been extended until December 1989.

Recent Concerns of the ECCB

Amongst the social issues of concern to the ECCB in recent years is that of compulsory military service. In 1983 the 23rd Synod, under the

chairmanship of Senior Josef Hromádka, passed a resolution calling on the government to consider an alternative form of service. The 24th Synod in 1985 passed a similar resolution. This stated that young people, whose faith and conscience opposed armed service, often ended up in psychiatric hospitals or had to break the law, and it urged the institution of some legal alternative service, such as social work. In March 1987, Jan Svoboda, an ECCB member wrote privately to the Federal Assembly making his own plea for an alternative to military service. More than 300 citizens endorsed it in the months that followed. The government's failure to respond led the 25th Synod in 1987 to include in its concluding resolution a further request for such an alternative. More recently, in March 1989, the Synodical Council raised with the Czechoslovak National Assembly the question of conscientious objection. In a petition to the Assembly's legislative committee, the church proposed that the government dispense with the repeated sentencing of conscientious objectors. At the same time the Synodical Council recommended the abolition of the death penalty in Czechoslovakia.

As the 25th Synod's concluding resolution revealed, the ECCB is concerned with widening the scope of its officially permitted activity. Proposals which passed the voting stage included calls that the Synodical Council seek the authorities' permission for state licensed ministers to conduct services in other parishes and to visit prisoners, and that it press the authorities for changes in current entrance procedures to the Comenius Theological Faculty.

Yet the Synod's resolutions do not always reflect the interests and concerns of church members, as Rev. Miloš Rejchrt pointed out in *Projevy mravní nouze* ('Signs of Moral Bankruptcy'), his account of the 1987 Synod.¹¹ Several dozen church members had sent a letter to the Synod asking them to call for discussion in the religious press of problems of church-state relations and to elect a commission to negotiate with the authorities an end to the criminal charge of 'Obstructing State Supervision of the Church'. However, the letter was neither read out nor discussed. Moreover, there was no discussion of a proposal that an amnesty be extended to prisoners of conscience.

Faced with the Synod's apparent reluctance to take up with the government the concerns of church members (its usual tactic is to charge the Synodical Council with this task) some members have recently bypassed the Synod and protested directly to the state authorities: for example, in July 1988 a handful of ECCB activists wrote to the Central Committee in support of the Roman Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia, calling on the government to grant

¹¹Miloš Rejchrt, 'Projevy mravní nouze', *Informace o chartě*, 1988 No. 3; printed in English in *RCL* Vol. 16 No. 4 (1988), pp. 365-67.

concessions to this oppressed church. Last January during unofficial commemorations of Jan Palach's protest suicide in 1968, 37 members wrote to *Rudé Právó* to reject the newspaper's criticism that his was a senseless death. Whereas, in the Czechoslovak Roman Catholic Church the leadership has tended to defend the rights of the laity, in the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren the clergy and laity must speak up for themselves, with all the attendant risks.

Appendices

Since this article was written documents have become available which shed more light on developments in the Czech Brethren Church. Traditionally the church's Synodical Council has not bothered to reply to those pastors and lay people who have criticised their policies, but in the

spring of this year they did respond to a letter sent by Jan Dus and 25 other church members. Subsequently the Council invited signatories of the letter to discussions with them and these were held on 21 June. Further talks are due to be held in the autumn.

A Letter to the Synodical Council

Dear brothers!

You have been energetic in your defence of the assistant minister Zvonimir Šorm who had his state licence withdrawn by the regional state Secretary for Church Affairs, and of assistant minister Pavel Pokorný, who was threatened with the loss of his state licence by the same official. Your intervention had a surprising result. The Secretariat for Church Affairs of the Czech Republic ordered the East Bohemian regional people's assembly to quash its ruling regarding the two assistant ministers. The success of your intervention raises hope within the church that the state authorities are beginning to abandon their undemocratic principles which have so far characterised their relations with the church. The church is beginning to hope that the positive changes taking place in the Soviet Union, linked with the name of Mr Gorbachev, are

starting to be seen in Czechoslovakia.

This hope is possibly a naive one. Yet a situation has been created in which you could do something similar to what was done by the German Protestant leaders in Stuttgart after the Second World War. You should admit that you have erred in the past decade and should announce a new beginning. Václav Havel described life in a totalitarian state as 'living a lie'. Here the lie comes from above, from those in possession of power. Whilst the lie spread throughout the state and society, our church did not become an oasis of truth. It conformed. It too began to live in lies and still does. It created its own church lie which is the more deplorable and dangerous since it lays claim to the Gospel, not worldly, atheistic lies. Our church overcomes the discrepancy between itself and the Gospel by foul means: the more it concerns itself with the Gospel, the

more it falsifies it because it does not wish to abandon its dishonest pronouncements. In the church, too, the lie comes from above, from the leadership, from you. You should now press the 26th Synod, which will meet in the autumn at least to renounce some of its most dishonest resolutions made since 1972, ie. since the start of 'normalisation'.

1. You should undertake to withdraw your letter of 11 February 1972 sent to presbytery councils, church elders and pastors: the principles which you urged the church to adopt in this letter are dishonest and in conflict with the Gospel. As the 12th Synod approved the letter in 1973, the letter can be revoked by no lower church body than the Synod.

2. You should revoke your pronouncement on the founding of the civil initiative, Charter 77, which was printed in the daily press, including *Rudé Právo* on 15 January 1977. The Charter 77 manifesto is just and therefore you should have welcomed it. Instead, however, under pressure from the state, you distanced yourself from Charter 77 and in so doing allowed the persecution of Charter signatories and supported undemocratic forces in the state.

3. You should revoke your unjust reprimand of 29 September 1977 directed at some signatories of the Letter of the 31 of 7 May 1977. The 31 church members had sent a letter to the Czech Federal Assembly stating that state bodies were violating state laws and interfering in the life and work of the church. You should have welcomed and supported this letter because it was correct and serious in every respect. Instead you condemned the letter and its authors.

4. You should urge the 26th Synod to revoke sections 2.04 and 2.05 of your communiqué to the 25th Synod which in the autumn of 1987 were approved by that synod. In 1987 you should have warned the church that

secret police employees were demanding information from citizens to which they were not entitled, and that they were misusing this information to suppress their legal activities. Instead you requested church officials to be open in conversations with secret police members. Though the above mentioned sections do not name the secret police it is quite clear from the text of your communiqué that you had the secret police in mind. You called for openness not only towards the secret police members but also towards other state representatives, ie. also in conversations with church secretaries many of whom operate in the same manner as secret policemen.

At the very least the four above mentioned dishonest pronouncements should be revoked by the 26th Synod. The great majority of church officials fully understood your dishonest principles and took them on board completely. These brethren were not, however, aware of the dishonesty of your policy making. . . If some of your decisions are not revoked church officials will continue in their old ways. This would be detrimental to Czechoslovak society which is currently in a state of general crisis. This crisis could be overcome without bloodshed if the ruling political party were to find the courage to continue what it began in 1968 and what the Communist Party of the Soviet Union is now doing: honestly and critically appraising the path it has been following. Yet how are atheists to find the courage to speak truthfully if Christ's disciples set them such a bad example? You should also think about the interests of your own church. If we continue in our present decline and abandonment of faith, our church will be condemned by its Lord and find it too late to repent (Hebrews 12:19). The Czech nation would be justified in trampling it underfoot like salt

that has lost its saltiness (Matt. 5:13), because our church has abandoned the good traditions of the old Czech Protestants and Czech Brethren and in times of difficulty has forsaken the people. For this reason it is imperat-

ive that the 26th Synod revoke at least these four above-mentioned dishonest resolutions.

Signed by 26 ECCB members
2 February 1989

The Synodical Council Responds

Dear brother Dus,
The members of the Synodical Council have read your letter and discussed its contents at a meeting on 23 March 1989.

With regard to points one to three:

The Synodical Council is not prepared to express an opinion on the past pronouncements and official communiqués of the Synodical Council. We wish to act responsibly in the present, but refuse to criticise the actions of brethren who held office before us. As regards point three we would like to add that it is not within the competence of the Synodical

Council to revoke decisions made by the pastoral council.

With regard to point four:

Paragraphs 2.04 and 2.05 of the Synodical Council's communiqué to the 25th Synod can in no way be interpreted as an invitation to openness in dealings with the secret police. On the contrary we believe that paragraph 2.05 rules out this possibility all together.

With fraternal greetings,
The Synodical Council of the ECCB

4 April 1989

Appendix Paragraphs 2.04 and 2.05 of the Synodical Council's communiqué to the 25th Synod:

2.04

Members of the State Secretariat for Church Affairs at all levels are not the only state representatives with which our ministers and lay church officials come into contact. Such contacts should not be avoided. The work of spreading the Gospel is performed publicly and in our work we have nothing to keep quiet or hide. On the contrary, every meeting with someone outside the

church presents an opportunity for explaining the work of our church and dispelling misunderstanding.

2.05

In all discussions with representatives of society and state you should display openness, dignity and respect for your partner's assignment in an effort to understand others, as befits Christ's disciples.