

**THE TOTALITARIAN REGIME IN
CZECHOSLOVAKIA FROM 1948-1989
AND ITS INTERFERENCE WITH THE LIFE OF
THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

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During the years 1948-1989, Christian churches in Czechoslovakia were to a large extent formed by the attitude of the totalitarian regime and the state toward religion and the church, and put into action by legal, judicial, military, administrative and police measures and interventions. Forty years of totalitarianism—systematic persecution and anti-religious propaganda continues to bear fruit even today. However, mistrust toward churches and the expressive atheism of the Czech society have different reasons as well and it is not possible to “blame the communists for everything.” Centuries of religious disputes and struggles as well as churches abusing both spiritual and secular power contribute to the present spiritual and religious situation in our country. Christians of the Czech United Methodist Church (UMC) are grateful for being allowed to express and live freely their faith in Christ, to contribute gifts and service to the world UMC, and to strengthen the faith of Christ’s church. They want to bear credible witness of God and His work in our world. The Czech society is still burdened with the legacy of totalitarianism; a deep historical and spiritual reflection on those forty years and their consequences are still an important step we have to take on the way to our own spiritual renewal as well as on the way to our neighbors outside the church.

The aim of this paper is to outline how the Communist regime affected the shape and function of the Czech UMC between 1948 and 1989. Primary attention will be paid to the harshest phase of the regime’s fight against religion and churches, i.e., the period 1949 and 1955. The Roman-Catholic Church, Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren and the Hussite Church have, for several reasons, deeply reflected on this period. Unfortunately, the Czech UMC has not found adequate resources (personnel and probably intellectual as well as spiritual) among its members to do the same.

The totalitarian regime had a significantly different attitude toward Catholicism than Protestantism. The main ideological enemy (as well as the most powerful) was understandably the Roman Catholic Church, and the communist regime tried to isolate the Catholic Church from the other churches. This isolation was partially successful, at least in the 1950s, but not in its ultimate results. Prior to the rise of the communist state, deep friendships had formed between Catholics and Protestants when they were thrust together in Nazi concentration camps and prisons. This wave of

friendship and solidarity across denominations, rooted as it was by unity in Christ was eventually very strong, but unfortunately it was also redeemed with blood and immense suffering. While it is useful for the Czech UMC to explain the difference in the attitude of the communist regime to the Catholic and Protestant Churches, it is more important that we recognize that our brothers and sisters served and loved God as much as we did but they suffered and died in far greater numbers. We express our gratitude to God for He is living and active, as we also give thanks to those who remained active in their faith, hope and love despite experiencing severe persecution. The Czech UMC, as well as all other Christian churches, has stories of both martyrs and collaborationists. It is important that we deeply reflect on our history, study our corporate spiritual journey, and from that reflection learn to bear witness to succeeding generations. We should endeavor to renew our Church still marked (but not only) by the totalitarian regime. Reading the sermon “The Atonement of Priests” spoken by Tomáš Halík¹ during a mass liturgy held at the pilgrimage of priests in Velehrad on September 26, 1990, as part of the third year of the Decade of Spiritual Renewal of the Nation was for me personally an important step.² It is a shame that our Church has not undertaken a similar deep historical and spiritual reflection, with a consequent act of reconciliation. Although the minutes of the Methodist annual conferences of 1990 and 1991 contain a partial record of the dialogue on this topic which took place in the first years after 1989, these dialogues were still stigmatized with the theological antagonisms of the time. The long-term consequences of the totalitarian regime continue to be felt. An evaluation of the influence which the totalitarian regime had on the formation of the Czech UMC also should continue. In 2005, V. D. Schneeberger published a book of memoirs, observations and experiences from the years 1949-1989 titled *We Served under Totalitarianism*. A later volume *Unoverthrown* (2009) by Zuzana Sedláčková disagrees with the perspectives of Schneeberger.³

¹ Tomáš Halík is a Czech Roman Catholic theologian, priest, psychologist and sociologist of religion. In June, 2008, Pope Benedict XVI granted him the title of Chaplain of His Holiness (inf. papal prelate) which justifies him to be addressed as Monsignor (abr. Mons.) or prelate. He studied sociology and philosophy at the Philosophical Faculty of the Charles University in Prague, and he was a student of Jan Patočka. During the Communist rule, he was banned from teaching and worked in various occupations, first as a company psychologist and later as a psychotherapist for drug addicts. In 1978, he was secretly ordained as a Catholic priest by the bishop in Erfurt, and until 1989, he was a prominent member of the so-called “underground church” and, in the 1980s, he was a close associate of Cardinal Tomášek. He is a consultant to the Pontifical Council for the Dialogue with non-believers. He has been a lecturer of religious studies at the Philosophical Faculty of the Charles University in Prague. He spent a trimester as a hosting professor at Oxford (2001) and Cambridge (2003); he also was one of the external advisors of Czech President Václav Havel.

² Thomas Halík and Oto Madr, *O přítomnou církev a společnost* (Praha: Křesťanská akademie, 1992), 48-53.

³ The Sedláčeks served as preachers of the UMC in Protivín and Plzeň in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Josef Sedláček was dispossessed of the state approval to perform clerical service in November, 1972. He was arrested, imprisoned and sentenced. The entire Sedláček family managed to immigrate to Switzerland in 1979.

Historical reflection on the Czech UMC during the years 1948-1989 has several obstacles. First, there is the concern that the memories will die with the witnesses. The witnesses of the events of the 1950s and 1960s are slowly departing. Second, we must deal with the reality that their memories are personal and subjective, which has its advantages and disadvantages. Third, the records of congregations, the headquarters of the Church and Protocols of annual conferences either do not speak about key events, or speak about them in veiled references—even then they appear very rarely.

The following is not intended as an evaluation either of the events or the people and the decisions they made between 1948 and 1989. Instead it is only a few notes and remarks making broad comparisons, based on Roman-Catholic texts, on interviews with the witnesses of the totalitarian regime, and on an examination of the records of the UMC and the records of the congregation in Prague 2 and Plzeň 3.

Catholics

The harshest phase of the persecution of Czech Christians began in June, 1948, when the communist regime began arresting Catholic clergy and active lay-members of the churches. In November 1948, the Czechoslovak Catholic bishops Beran, Čársky and Trochta visited the Vatican. Pope Pius XII and his adviser Tardini warned them that hope for a fast fall of communism was unrealistic and that there was a need to prepare the Church for life under totalitarianism. For this reason, the bishops were granted the so-called Mexican faculties.⁴ All attempts by the Catholic Church headquarters to negotiate with the communist regime, as well as the protests of Cardinal Beran, several bishops, and countless believers elicited no response. The government continued its crusade against the Church. Church financial collections were restricted, all training and teaching of people outside the church was forbidden, and a detailed list of all religious groups and their representatives was used as a source for further actions in the hate campaign against the Church, its representatives and the Vatican. In the summer of 1949, the Czechoslovak State ceased diplomatic relations with the Vatican and adopted laws aligning the Church to the state. Catholic bishops were interned and forbidden to hold office. The communist regime also liquidated all independent church presses. In 1950, monasteries were abolished by “Action K” and 2,376 friars were interned in “centralizing monasteries,” which were actually concentration camps. “Action P,” which united the

⁴ “Mexican faculties” is term for a collection of dispensations enabling priests and bishops to independently perform acts that would otherwise need approval from their supervisors, and provide further relief from formal rules which are applied in the Catholic Church under usual conditions. The “faculties” enabled establishing: an alternative hierarchy, the secret study of theology, secret ordinations, celebration of the mass even in difficult prison conditions, etc. Mexican faculties are usually granted in those cases when the church in a particular area suffers from persecution and following normal procedures would threaten lives and the maintenance of church structures. The name comes from the first half of the twentieth century when these faculties were granted to the Catholic Church in Mexico.

Greek, Catholic and Orthodox Churches, took place on the very same day. The successive liquidation and removal from society of congregations of nuns was commenced shortly afterwards. At the same time, staged trials against Catholic hierarchy were held. Bishops, abbots, priests and active Christians were tried for high treason, espionage, for "abuse of the clerical office," for aiding of a crime or misprision of felony and for obstruction of the supervision of churches and religious groups. Based upon new laws, thousands of people were sent to forced labor camps without being tried; an administrative decision that the person did not have a positive relation to the socialist system was sufficient. A great number of priests and active Christians who were deemed inconvenient by the regime were among these people. The forced labor camps for "class enemies" existed until 1954.

By the middle of the 1950s, the main administrative provisions which had destroyed the traditional structures of the churches no longer needed to be enforced. By that time the churches were under the full control of the state, the autonomy of their inner administration having been liquidated, and their influence on people was limited to church services and teaching religion at school under state supervision. After 1968, persecution consisted mainly of ideological supervision by "church secretaries" over the activities of priests. Those priests who did not acquiesce were, often for trivial reasons, denied state approval to perform religious services. They were prosecuted for any activity not tolerated by the state, or more generally for the obstruction of state supervision over churches. The state police also pursued and subdued the activities of the "underground" portion of the church. Even during the early 1980s several murders committed in Poland and Czechoslovakia were allegedly the acts of the secret police trying to break the contacts of the Church with the Vatican and the church in the West.

Protestants

The attitude of the communist regime toward reformation churches was significantly milder than toward the Roman Catholic Church. The communist regime tried to use the historical feud between Czech Catholics and Evangelicals to their benefit. This feud should have been deepened by the fact that the Roman Catholic Church suffered much more from repressions, imprisonments and labor camps. Marxist-oriented historiography presented Hussitism as a people's rebellion against Catholic obscurantism and despotism. The last bishop of the Unity of the Brethren, J. A. Komenský, was highlighted as a pedagogue, the teacher of nations. This was done deliberately in service of communist propaganda. The Communist Party even proclaimed itself

a kind of “Hussite movement continuator.”⁵ The communist propaganda also successfully manipulated non-Catholic churches. But the pervasive persecutions, imprisonments and labor camps eventually caused those walls built for centuries between Catholics and Evangelicals to fall down. Mutual understanding and solidarity is probably one of the few positive aspects to befall the church by totalitarianism.

Professor J. L. Hromádka, professor of systematic theology from 1920-1939 and Dean of the Evangelic Theological Faculty of J. A. Komenský from 1950-1966, played an important role in Protestant circles.⁶ Hromádka significantly influenced the political orientation of Czech Protestants in the second half of the twentieth century. He accepted the new perspective of the world offered by the Soviet propaganda. By the weight of his authority he called Czech Protestants to account for church social events and thus he became a political activist of the new regime. On the other hand, he tried to use the confidence the Communist Party had in him to protect the theological faculty and the church from open oppression. However, he is criticized by many even today for becoming a “mouthpiece” of Marxist ideas of the future of the world; a collaborationist who lead Czech Protestants to a shamefully servile dependence on the communist regime. Many people also reproach Hromádka for being quiet about persecutions, political trials (particularly the execution of M. Horáková who was a member of the congregation of the Czech Brethren in Smíchov, Prague) and the continuous violation of the legal order. It is beyond the scope of this paper to evaluate the personality and theology of professor Hromádka as well as his political and spiritual influence. Incongruity and ambiguity are obvious. His influence went far beyond the scope of his church (the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren). As the Dean and Professor of the Evangelic Theological Faculty of J. A. Komenský, he was an important representative of the Ecumenical Council

⁵ When “People’s Militias” took their oath at the Staroměstské Square, Prague, in 1948, a brass band played “Ktož jsú boží bojovníci.” Working (later “people’s”) militia were working-class fighting units established by the decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party on February 21, 1948, during the preparation of the putsch in Czechoslovakia. There has never been a law authorizing the creation and existence of People’s Militias. Militias were intended to defend industrial companies (often against their legal owners) and to terrorize political opponents. The communists in Militias made use of their rule all the time. Military exercises where they learned to operate weapons were organized for them. The units were under the direct control of the Communist Party leadership. The General Secretary of the Party was their Commander-in-chief. Their arms and weapons were stored right in the factories. At times of disorder, the Militias were called to arms together with the police and the army against demonstrators and other “anti-socialist elements.” Beginning in 1950, the most reliable factory units formed “shock divisions” predetermined to cooperate with the police in the liquidation of “anti-state” elements. The song “Ktož jsú boží bojovníci” is one of the most famous chorals of the Hussite times, sometimes considered a kind of anthem.

⁶ A pupil of K. Barth, Hromádka studied in Basel, Heidelberg and Aberdeen. After the occupation in 1939, he and his family left for the USA where he lectured on theology at several colleges. He returned to Czechoslovakia after the war. Comparing the condition of the Republic and Western liberal capitalism led him to an innocent and uninformed trust in the new concept of the world offered by the Soviet propaganda.

of churches, the founder of the international Christian Peace Conference (1958) and re-former of Czech Evangelicals. His letter of July 20, 1948, addressed to the congregation preacher L. Schneider and deposited in the records of the UMC congregation Prague II—Ječná proves the respect which Professor Hromádka enjoyed in the Czech UMC. Professor Jan Sokol, a Czech philosopher, translator, university teacher and publicist, one of the outstanding contemporary Czech Christian intellectuals, assessed the role of Professor Hromádka as follows:

during the war in the USA, the prominent and really important theologian Hromádka shared the opinion of many intellectuals that socialism represents a historically necessary development, which the Church cannot resist, and despite certain hesitation he finally took Stalin's communism seriously. Although we cannot consider him a collaborationist on any account, he did the communist power a valuable service and made it partially internationally legal on one hand, and negotiated substantially better conditions for his Church on the other. Many protestants became genuine communists under his influence. They painfully opened their eyes—together with him—after 1968.⁷

Ecclesiastical Laws of October 14, 1949 and Their Applications

The ecclesiastical laws of October 14, 1949, became the main tool for breaking traditional church structures, placing them under the ultimate control of the state, liquidating the autonomy of their internal administration and limiting their influence in civil life to church services and teaching religion at schools under state supervision. The first of the laws, law no. 217/49 of Coll. was called “The Act for establishing a state office for ecclesiastical matters.” The other law no. 218/49 of Coll. was “The Act of economic provision of churches and religious societies.”

These ecclesiastical laws became the principal means used by the totalitarian state to wield control over churches. The key components of the laws were: first, it became necessary to obtain state approval to perform a clerical job.⁸ Second, the laws created total economic dependence of the churches and religious societies on the state. Financial dependence was completed following the reform of Czech currency in 1953 which robbed all non-state institutions of monetary reserves. Financial control was double-sided, disobedient clerics were punished by salary reduction, and extra bonuses were paid to loyal ones.

“The state office for church matters” was a central authority that coordinated the inspection of churches as defined by the ecclesiastical laws. Apart from that there were “church secretaries” who were employees of the church departments in all “national committees” (national committees were state administration authorities at different levels—region, district, town—

⁷ Petr Fiala and Jiri Hanus, eds., *Katolická církev a totalitarismus v českých zemích* (Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury, 2001), 205.

⁸ Clergy of all Christian churches who wanted to remain in active ministry had to promise loyalty to the socialist state at the beginning of 1950. Those who refused did not obtain the approval to perform clerical service. From 1950-1989, all incoming clerics had to promise their loyalty.

from 1945 to 1990). They exercised control over all clergy in the district or region, granted state approval to lower clergy, nominated clergy for extra financial bonuses, approved the sermons of clerics from other districts, etc. The church secretaries then retroactively informed the state office for ecclesiastical matters about the course of events in their areas.

Together with the economic provision of churches and religious societies the state officially recognized those churches that had not been officially acknowledged before (the Baptist Union, the Unity of Czech Brethren, the Seventh-day Adventist Church). The overwhelming majority of church associations represented by the above mentioned churches were abolished simultaneously with other associations through which even the previously legal churches and church societies had performed community, missionary and charity activities.

In the spring of 1950, all the leaders of non-Catholic churches publicly assented to the above stated "anti-ecclesial" laws. The professed loyalty of the church leaders was not supported by all clerics and believers which caused the division between the leaders on one hand and the clerics and believers on the other to grow deeper. However, the communist regime found this breach quite useful. Only persons loyal enough and approved by the regime could be in leadership positions in the churches. Unfortunately, the loyalty of some leaders turned into collaborationism. In addition, there were secret collaborators of the State Police who infiltrated among clerics as well as laymen. The atmosphere of fear and mutual distrust reigned over the whole society and in all churches.

United Methodist Church

The years 1948-1955 set the direction of the relationship between the communist regime and the churches. While the main series of administrative measures were complete by 1950, the worst persecution continued until about 1955. Stalin's death on March 5, 1953, and the death of Czechoslovak President K. Gottwald on March 14, 1953, did not make the situation better. It was not until 1960, that significant relief from this highly oppressive state of affairs was realized.⁹ After 1968, persecution consisted mainly of the ideological supervision by the church secretaries.

The report of Superintendent V. Vančura contained in the Protocol from

⁹ 15,379 convicts were released in May, 1953, from Czechoslovak prisons. The amnesty also applied to 4,035 prisoners in uranium penal labor camps. Upon the granting of amnesty by the President in 1955, a total of 7,227 people were released. A new constitution was adopted in the spring of 1960 and it anchored the leading role of the Communist Party in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. Simultaneously on the occasion of the fifteenth anniversary of the liberation of Czechoslovakia, the President declared a wide amnesty. It applied to 5,319 of the 8,708 victims of the political processes who were still in Czechoslovak prisons and labor camps. The amnesty in 1960 was a delayed reaction to the first phase of the process of de-Stalinization which began in 1956. The conservative communist leadership thus tried to get rid of their sins from the past in "a silent way." However, the victims of the political processes had not been rehabilitated; instead this was a gesture of good-will which mandated the release of many, but not all, of those who had been unjustly sentenced to prison.

the annual conference of UMC held in Prague June 24-27, 1948, reads:

It is not necessary to keep secret what everybody speaks about in the church circles these days. Those who are faint-hearted will get frightened. A forced uniting of churches is being discussed, together with reducing the influence of churches—nationalizing the preachers—confiscation of church property, etc. It is certain that great historical times have just begun. We may be only actors in the prologue of a great God's drama. Act One may begin. If we are impatient, Jesus' word will satisfy us: "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you" We have been called to silent spiritual work. We want to be faithful to God, to ourselves and to the nation. Our church has been under the influence of the gospel from its origin until this hour, and no-one, neither man nor the state, can deny that where we performed, we always lessened poverties, political suppression, injustice on workers, we revived the divine in our souls and we created brotherhood based not only upon laws, but mainly on love and spiritual bonds. We have nothing to be ashamed of or to conceal. We want our people, our nation and our state to know us as a public religious society, as a progressive and social church. We have never cared of worldly fortune, but of spiritual and heavenly goods, of a fertile service to the nation.¹⁰

That year, the annual conference was presided over by Superintendent V. Vančura, as Bishop P. N. Garber could not be present and Superintendent Barták was in the USA. In 1949, the annual conference was held as well, but the Bishop was not allowed to attend it again and was only able to send a letter. In the following five years (1950-1954), the annual conferences were not held at all. If we can find anything at all in the records of the headquarters and congregations, then it is only minuscule notes under the headings "The State and the Church," "Church Property," etc.

Isolation

After 1948, the UMC in Czechoslovakia was isolated from the world UMC. The first visit of Methodists from abroad (apart from the bishop) is noted in 1959, and it was on their return from the USSR. The bishop could not be present at the annual conference. Bishop Dr. F. Sigg was first allowed to attend the Annual conference in 1957, but only as a guest. Bishops in the Czech and Slovak UMC were not allowed to perform their powers from 1948-1989. They were not allowed to preside at annual conferences, they could attend the conference only as guests without the possibility to interfere with or influence the agenda, they were only allowed to perform a salutation and ordain clergy. The bishops were not allowed to decide on transferring preachers or to appoint their deputies—the superintendents. From 1948-1989, the superintendents in the Czech and Slovak UMC were elected. Reintroducing the practice of appointing the superintendent by the bishop after 1989 was accompanied by tensions in the church. Tumultuous discussions about this topic are partially recorded in the Protocols of the annual conferences.

The long-time isolation of the Czech and Slovak UMC was lessened in

¹⁰ Protocol of Annual Conference of Czech and Slovak United Methodist Church, 1948, 28.

the 1980s mainly by material assistance received by pastors' families and through them to the UMC congregations, which took place especially at Christmas time. Participation of Czech and Slovak delegates at Central and General Conferences was regulated by strict state control. Each trip to the West was conditioned upon the granting of special permission. Upon return, a written report had to be handed in (often followed by interrogations). Each contribution to the Conference or meeting abroad had to be written and submitted to the state authorities for prior approval.

The communist regime isolated the churches within "church walls." No gatherings except for regular ones—Sundays or biblical hours—were allowed without special permission. Gatherings of children and youth were under extra strict supervision (the regime kept an alert eye on their upbringing), and prayer meetings were also not allowed. The exception was home groups as their organization was provided by the UMC rules. We bear the consequences of the isolation of the congregations, the church and churches until today.

Transferring Pastors

Between 1949 and 1989, permission (state approval) to perform a pastor's job was limited to the parish where the pastor was serving at the time. Each transfer meant the danger of losing permission. In many cases the transfer was impossible, otherwise the congregation and the church would lose the pastoral position. Vacated parishes (e.g. after the death of the pastor) had to be filled with a new pastor within thirty days according to the law. If a new pastor was not installed within the thirty-day limit, the local church would permanently be without a minister. Such practice was also part of the church-liquidating strategy of the regime.

For example, the "central congregation of the Church" in Prague 2—Ječná was very "lively" even in the worst years of 1949-1952. The number of children attending Sunday school increased, many concerts and lectures were held in the congregation rooms, etc. When the pastor of the congregation, L. Schneider died in 1952, a new pastor was not appointed and the congregation was administered by Superintendent Vančura. It is possible that the reason a new pastor was not appointed was the lack of preachers which the church (all Christian churches) quickly started to suffer from. It is also very probable that a new pastor was not appointed on purpose, upon the urging of state authorities.

Transferring pastors was further complicated by the housing policy of the state. The list of church property as of April 30, 1951, served as a springboard for further restrictions. A new pastor in the parish was not automatically allowed to move into the parish housing of his predecessor, he had to apply for the flat at the municipal national committee. If the parish flat was larger than provided by the law (which it often was) the pastor had to pay fees for the extra flat area. At the same time, it was explicitly forbidden that the fees be paid by the church. This made the financial situation of ministerial families even worse.

The interrupted continuity in transferring pastors is noticeable even in the present Czech UMC. There certainly are other reasons for the unwillingness of pastors and their families to move and we should not attribute a willingness or unwillingness to serve Christ and His people as the reason that some are more willing to move than others. Nevertheless, a desire to safely remain in the same place has become the tradition, while the discontinuity of itinerancy has become unfamiliar and often unattractive.

Abolishing Christian Societies and Organizations

The Communist Party abolished and banned all Christian societies and organizations. The first affected were those which were designed to educate or had a mass appeal and thus were able to influence a large number of people. All sport unions and clubs were forcibly united in March, 1948. The law of the unified school which led to the liquidation of church schools was adopted in April, 1948. A year later the Scout organization “Junák” was forced to join the nation-wide organization “the Czechoslovak Youth Union.” The Union worked as a political indoctrinating organization aimed to lead children to a communist persuasion. Within the UMC these provisions affected all children and youth unions, summer camps, and also the Sister Committee of Christian Service and Orphan Care Society.

The letter of J. Černý (secretary of the Church) to the UMC congregations of November, 1951, announced to all UMC parishes that the Sister Committee of Christian Service (SCCS) could not exist in the form of a union and that it could perform its activities only within the congregation and not under its own name. The SCCS officials were not allowed to make any special speeches; they had to be made by the pastor or lay preacher confirmed by the state. An entry in the minutes of the congregation in Prague 2—Ječná¹¹ gives us evidence of the bravery of Czech Methodist women: “An informative meeting of sisters was called on November 29, 1955, in order to ‘reintroduce prayers of sisters.’” The minutes do not say whether the meeting took place, nor if it did what was the result.

The Orphan Care Society was established and its regulations approved in 1924. The Society ran an orphanage and old people’s home in Bohemia, and for this reason it bought chateaus in Horní Počernice, Prague and in Týnec u Klatov, and it established a convalescence home Poušť in Bechyně. All of these facilities were abolished and the Orphan Care Society was forced to “voluntarily” dissolve in January, 1950. In the records of the congregation in Prague 2—Ječná, we can read an interesting quotation from the letter of Superintendent J. P. Barták of March 15, 1950:

This year, only the school shall choose children for a stay in the convalescence home. Those children who will take part in the “Happy Work Competition” will be prioritized . . . Only then come children of other working parents. There is no hope that we could accept children from other social classes. We thus recommend that the children participate in the Happy Work Competition as then even a child of

¹¹ Minutes of United Methodist Church, Praha 2, 193.

a tradesman.¹²

The report of the secretary for the Church Committee J. Černý in the Protocol of the Annual Conference held on October 26-27, 1955, reads:

The Orphan Care Society that was part of the activities of our Church worked until 1950. It was abolished in 1950 and all its property was taken over by the Church The convalescence home Poušť in Bechyně was rented by the Airlines which use it for the recreation of their workers The orphanage which we ran as part of The Orphan Care Society in Týnec u Klatov was liquidated in 1950 as all care of children was taken over by the state. At the same time the old people's home was abolished for the reason that the chateau in Týnec was too large for such work.¹³

The convalescence home Poušť was later restored and reopened in 1959 for summer stays of the families of the church members (but only for them!). The chateau in Horní Počernice is again the property of the UMC today and a home for asylum seekers has been established there. The chateau in Týnec u Klatov was formally returned to the Church after 1989, but the legal representatives of the church at the time ensured that the actual reversion did not take place.

The Protocol of the Annual Conference held in Prague in 1959 contains a comment about the chateau in Týnec u Klatov: "When speaking about the buildings of the Church, let me mention (report of the Sup. Vančura) our former social facility for orphans in Týnec u Klatov. The chateau still serves the frontier-guards, and until world peace is ensured, we can hardly expect its reversion for any other service in our Church."¹⁴

Liquidation of Free Church Press

The liquidation of Christian societies and organizations was preceded by the liquidation of Free Church presses. A publishing house, Church Press, was established for all Protestant churches on January 1, 1950, which caused the subsequent liquidation of presses in the single churches and a total liquidation of Free Church presses. Materials were smuggled to the Republic in the following years, which of course was illegal. Publication of Methodist "Biblical Thoughts for Children Aged 10 to 14" and "Biblical Thoughts for the Youth and Adults" were stopped on January 1, 1952, and another Methodist magazine "Christian Awakener" (published from 1923 with the supplement *Young Methodist*) was ceased in the same year. Since December, 1952, *Konstanz Sparks* has been the only publication which continued to be published as an inter-denominational magazine. From 1958-1962, the UMC managed to publish twenty-three issues of the magazine *The Methodist*, the UMC *Song Book* in 1957, and from 1968-1970, *The Circular* was published irregularly (and only in the form of sheets). The Methodist magazine *Word and Life* was not started until 1984. Any church publications produced between 1948 and 1989 were exposed to strict censorship (preceded also

¹² Minutes of United Methodist Church Praha 2.

¹³ Protocol of Annual Conference of Czech and Slovak United Methodist Church 1955, 20.

¹⁴ Protocol of Annual Conference of Czech and Slovak United Methodist Church 1959, 23.

by strict self-censorship). Free presses after 1989 have not moved away from a narrow denominational character and are limited financially and in personnel. The Protocol of the Annual Conference in 1960 reads: “The publishing committee announces that it could not work as it is not allowed to publish.”

Finance, Church Buildings and Property

Management of the churches was under the total control of the state from 1948 until 1989. The euphemistic “economic security of churches” was in fact a tool of control and oppression. Clergy salaries were very low, pastors’ families suffered from real poverty besides persecution and discrimination. There was no legal way for the congregations to contribute to the ministers’ salaries. Money gathering for the reconstruction of buildings was not allowed, etc. But illegal financial support of pastors did exist in the 1980s. Especially the financial and material gifts coming from abroad in the last years of totalitarianism were a great help for the pastors and their families. V. D. Schneeberger remembers:

There was a problem with the precincts which the Church leased. If there was any profit, it was taxed by 70%, so hardly anything was left for the following year. It was necessary to change the voltage from 120v to 220v in Ječná (Prague 2). The budget of such reconstruction was beyond financial capacity of the church and the system of taxation did not make saving money in advance possible. We received for this quite a big project at the time a gift from Switzerland, but it was not enough. We thought up a twist so that the tax office could not get us: we borrowed money from other church funds and we paid them back with money from leases, and so we showed debts and did not have anything to tax. The tax office clerk was furious when she found out, but could not do anything at all, as it was unchallengeable by law.¹⁵

Economic and legal conditions in which the church lived were a kind of stagnation rather than development, there was no discussion about mission at all. It is true that until 1989 a hard fight to “survive only” was fought on all fronts. But today in the course of twenty years we can see other problems we are still carrying from the totalitarian times.

Church buildings which remained the property of the church or were returned were dilapidated. Members of the church are still getting used to the fact that it is necessary to pay church employees and to pay for church work from their own resources. Unfortunately, the member base of many congregations is not sufficient or financially strong. Nevertheless, some church buildings were restored and revived after 1989. A new church with a parsonage was built in Plzeň after 1989. Church diaconal facilities work independently (supported by the state, partially from abroad, as well as domestic church resources). Generally speaking, the church entered the era of liberal trade unprepared, paralyzed by long years of oppression and stagnation.

¹⁵ Vilem Schneeberger, *Sloužili jsme za totalitu* (Praha: Evangelická církev metodistická, 2005).

Property compensation between churches and the state and the related separation of the church from the state has not yet been finished. This fact itself is very unpleasant and it is a thorny problem throughout the whole society. When the media talk about the church they mainly talk about property which is not good. Heated media discussions are held about returning property mainly to the Roman-Catholic Church but according to many people's opinions it was the Catholic Church itself who in the distant past stole the property first—from poor workers or Protestants.

Conclusion

Since 1989, the situation of the churches has normalized in the new state order. The Roman Catholic Church struggles with polarization caused by the fact that theological openness and plurality as well as nontraditional church practices developed in the hidden part of the church, whereas official theological education was of worse quality, closed to new theological streams and restricted by the state. Some theologians or married priests who in 1990 started to work officially for the church were consequently pushed away again. An explosive atmosphere was created around priests or other persons in the church apparatus who were members of the collaborationist organization *Pacem in terris* or collaborated with the State Police. The isolation of the Czech UMC from the world UMC has its analogous consequences. Theological openness and plurality are uncommon within the Czech UMC. Different forms of church practice are sometimes accompanied with distrust by the church leadership, and there is an unwillingness to accept new orders of worship and liturgies which could act as a unifying element of our sacral and congregational life—this is what makes life and service of the Czech UMC difficult. Nevertheless the life and work of the Czech UMC is progressively stabilizing and our work shall not be in vain, God willing.

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