

Theme: Bridges

Dialogue with Mark Douglas

### **1. The Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren as a Bridge**

“The Church is sent into this world, but it is not of this world. It has no right of home in any institution, nation, or other earthly community. It breaks down the boundaries of all groups and demolishes all walls dividing into different ones, as Jesus did. It penetrates old and new social formations, is not afraid of any changes, and in the freedom of faith carries out its service where it is despised. Its permanent mission is exodus, going out. Even against its will and despite its fainting, the Lord sends it on its journey again.” (CCE Principles, first version 1925, revised 1966)

Most of us know the symbol for the church in the form of a ship on a swollen surface. In this description, the church is in a state of exodus, of sending out, the main feature of which is bridging, connecting different segments in society and the world. This is something highly active. It is not just about managing the storm, but rather being a point of support in the storm and, against all alienating and centrifugal tendencies, looking for what can unite us.

### **2. The Church as a bridge - to what or to whom?**

- a) To the nation (1920s and 1930s)
- b) Between East and West (1950s and 1960s)
- c) Within the church (1970s and 1980s)
- d) To the unbelieving part of society (after 2000)

#### **a) Bridge to the nation**

In its beginnings, the Czechoslovak Church adopted Palacký's thesis that the Hussite and Brethren periods create the meaning of national history. Evangelicals are a minority, but they hold the key to Czech history, the heart of the Czech people, and the soul of the nation. Theological and dogmatic questions do not play a primary role; it is a matter of conscience, enthusiasm for the truth, and opposition to the Catholic Church. The cult of Jan Hus, the Hussite movement, the Unity of Brethren, and also T.G. Masaryk, the first Czechoslovak president, who assured Evangelicals that they were on the right side of history.

When it was founded in 1918, the ECCB had 160,000 members; after calls for the rest of the nation to join it, it gained another 100,000.

At that time, J.L. Hromádka warned that it was impossible to be satisfied with admiration for the social and moral nature of the Czech Reformation; the foundation of Czech Brethrenism rests on the foundations of the universal church. Dogma is not junk. He referred to the confessions of the church of the first centuries. "The essential correlate of the church is the confession of faith in Jesus Christ. The history of the church is at the same time the history of confession. And the history of dogma. Its content must be personally accepted and expressed."

A clear confession goes hand in hand with service in society. In 1935, JLH said to Czechoslovak Radio: "In order to stand firm, we need the personal sincerity of each of us and a conscious ideal to which we put ourselves and our nation at the service. ... Let us pay attention to those people who sacrificed their time and comfort, health and life for the awakening of our people, who believed that the justice of God and the truth of God rule over nations, that we are obliged to serve our neighbor and stand up for the rights of everyone (including national minorities) and seek friendship with neighboring nations."

### **b) The Bridge between East and West**

The end of the war was accompanied by a split between East and West, and due to the influence of the totalitarian regime, an iron curtain fell between the former allies. JLH is looking for a possible synthesis. This will be possible only on the assumption that the West undergoes a transformation and gets rid of the fear of the East, and vice versa. An atmosphere of goodwill and cooperation will help the humane forces in Soviet Russia.

For the 1st General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1948 in Amsterdam, JLH writes: There is something greater than the problem of democracy and freedom. What is at stake is outside the categories of capitalism and socialism, of the democratic West and the totalitarian East. It is about the last axioms of truth, justice, and moral community. Modern man has lost understanding of the highest authority and the arbiter to whom all people are subject. He emphasizes the descent of the Lord God into human corruption and sin in order to break the bonds of guilt and death. This is a vertical that is able to hold together what is otherwise hopelessly falling apart in alienation and hostility.

Under the influence of JLH, responsibility for events in society and the state was cultivated in the ECCB. A significant part of the church members were involved in activities against the totalitarian regime, or in unauthorized or monitored activities in congregations (youth work, songwriting, helping the persecuted). It was often in the church that official positions were connected with dissent.

### **c) The bridge within the church**

The ECCB took over 4 confessions, but as has been said, its original drive was rather enlightening, historicizing, at the expense of confession, so there was no inter-confessional sparking. But things were boiling elsewhere.

#### **• Charismatics – Classicists**

In the 1980s, a spiritual, charismatic revival occurred in a Prague congregation, with an emphasis on the gifts of the Holy Spirit such as speaking in tongues, the gift of prophecy, healing, refusing to baptize children, and rebaptizing. This ultimately led to the separation of this congregation from the church and the founding of a new denomination.

On the contrary, in 2000, the ECCB accepted the traditional congregations of the Unity of Brethren, which had separated from their church, whose leadership was in a charismatic direction.

#### **• Lutherans – Calvinists**

This is a small group on both sides, they are not at each other's throats at all, their interest is in studying and getting to know the work of M. Luther and J. Calvin. Although the ECCB is mostly Reformed, in recent years, mainly Luther's books have been published, including the Book of

Concord. This is due to the fact that there are several Lutheran churches in the Czech Republic, one smaller than the other.

- High Church – Low Church

High church emphasizes formal liturgy, sacraments, ritual, and episcopal structure, often resembling Roman Catholic traditions. Low church favors simpler, less liturgical, and often evangelical worship, focusing on preaching and personal faith.

There is no such division here, in the ECCB everything is “low”. However, in 2002 the Coena liturgical initiative was established, which defines itself as an initiative of CCE members who strive to deepen the spiritual, liturgical, and sacramental life in the church. Their activities remain limited within the boundaries of their group, without much influence on the congregations.

- Liberals – Pietists

The ECCB is predominantly liberal, pietism is prominent mainly in northern Moravia and western Bohemia. The loudest disputes have recently appeared on this border, namely in the cases of blessing homosexual couples and the LGBTQ community in general. And the disputes were of such a nature that some congregations considered leaving the church. A working group was established for dialogue between the two wings, and tensions were eased thanks to the fact that the majority decision of the synod is not binding on those who disagree with it.

Synod: “We live together in one church – all of us, people with different orientations and opinions. We, who are in the minority – whether in terms of relationships or in the minority of opinions. We should listen to each other, respect each other and be aware of the value that each of us has before God.”

While the reactions to the synod’s resolution from the Czech secular society were positive, welcoming and grateful, we have recorded harsh condemnations in the Czech ecumenical community.

#### **d) A bridge to the unbelieving part of society**

The ECCB has never been a missionary church, we are beginning to learn that. This is a paradox, given that mission is one of the essential features of the church.

Mission in the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren focuses on modern evangelization, pioneering projects and being open to society. Pioneering projects go beyond the walls of churches to reach people who would not normally come to church: Non-traditional services, community and diaconal projects, neighborhood communities.

Similar projects of the Dutch Protestant Church are an inspiration.

For an idea, I present the results of the 2021 census:

- Roman Catholic Church: 741,019 members (in 2011: 1,082,463).
- Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren: 32,577 members (in 2011: 51,858).
- Czechoslovak Hussite Church: 23,610 members (in 2011: 39,229).
- The number of people without a religion or those who did not answer the voluntary question has increased significantly.

### **3. Prerequisites for the function of a bridge**

- The ECCB accepted 4 confessions (Czech, Brethren, Helvetic, Augsburg), which equips it with ecumenical openness, the ability to absorb groups with different spirituality and mentality
- Theological, dogmatic issues did not play a primary role, more emphasis was placed on freedom of conscience, emphasis on community, practical Christianity (diakonia, work with the young generation, etc.)
- Ability and willingness to take responsibility for public affairs, to be part of the whole society and draw attention to human rights violations or to oppose the crude populism of some politicians
- Minority: the church as a minority can more easily understand other minorities (in the case of the persecution of Jews during the war, or currently towards Muslims, Roma, LGBTQ communities, etc.) The ECCB significantly contributed to reconciliation between Germans and Czechs in connection with the reflection of the brutal displacement of Sudeten Germans after the war. The Czechs then chose the "final solution", in which they attributed collective guilt to the entire German population in the republic. This chapter is still being raised and artificially created fear by some populists, even at the present time, when a congress of Sudeten Germans is being prepared in Brno, for the first time in the Czech Republic.

### **4. What prevents being a bridge?**

- When it was founded, the ECCB was very national, even nationalist. Czech congregations joined, German ones remained aside. There was a belief that nationality and the Evangelical faith would merge together. "Why am I an Evangelical? Because I am a Czech!" That was a very naive, shallow concept, and ultimately exclusive. Czechoslovakia at the time was multinational, but the ECCB defined itself by the national majority. If it hadn't been for a later correction, the church would have become a bunch of fans of our glorious history and even more glorious defeats.
- In the beginning, the ECCB had a strong anti-Catholic complex, which strongly influenced the form of the liturgy and the proclamation towards civility. This is positive from the point of view of comprehensibility, but in our country it has become so extreme that being civil means being normal. To this day, we still need to present ourselves as Evangelicals to the outside world as normal people. The anti-Catholic complex becomes a minority complex.
- The ECCB was not missionary. It is open in the sense of hospitality, we have open arms for everyone, our churches are low-threshold, we try to draw attention to ourselves and not demand too much, but when it comes to expressions of faith, we are very modest. We are more concerned with procedures and structures than with how to proclaim and share our faith.
- Society's distrust of institutions such as churches is very strong, only slightly less than that of political parties.

Even more than distrust, there is an aspect of indifference. According to research (Jan Loffeld: When God is Missing) and experience, people simply do not need to be interested in religion, they do not ask big questions, more than the meaning of life, it is about meaning in life.

Previously, Christianity was opposed to atheism, today it is apatheism (indifference). It turns out that people can live a fulfilled life even without contact with religion. It is a challenge: 90% of people in society have little or no interest in religion, yet they are not fundamentally against it, it is just outside their horizon.

## **Conclusion**

The Church is called into this world, but it is not of this world. Like God. There is no demand for them. Yet God offers a fulfilling life to all people even without people believing in him. The unnecessary God gives himself up and offers love. And he leaves everyone freedom.

The church is also un-necessary. It has no external support, which can make it freer and more authentic. From 2030, the separation of church and state will occur. Neither God nor the church has any privileges, they are there as a possibility and as a non-obvious privilege. People will always seek healing, peace, reconciliation, forgiveness. As a church, we have something to draw from and something to offer. And this is hidden in the gift of the Gospel, the good news about Jesus Christ. There is never enough good and hopeful news in our society. The point is not to compromise or dilute this message, so that all who want and seek have somewhere to come and something to receive.

God is non-necessary and at the same time irreplaceable.

The Church is replaceable. Or is it not? The point is whether the Church will not forget whom belongs to and will support everything that makes it a bridge.

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