

The Czech Republic and the Czech Brethren in particular in Corona-times

Like most countries in Europe, and most of the world, the Czech Republic lives under the spell of the Corona-Pandemic. Early in March, we saw the first cases, imported from Italy and the USA. As March went by, the virus spread in the Czech Republic rather fast and is still spreading. The government reacted swiftly and declared the state of emergency as early as March 12. Within a few days, public life came to a standstill. First, direct flights from China to Prague were cancelled and shortly thereafter, the borders were closed. Except for grocery stores, drug stores and very few other shops, all others had to close, also restaurants. Hotels were almost completely shut down. Tourism all but disappeared. Events of all kinds were forbidden and social distancing was ordered, meaning it wasn't allowed anymore for more than two people to meet, other than those living in the same household. All people in the Czech Republic are obliged to wear a face mask outside of the home – everywhere and always, even on TV.

When wearing a face mask became law, and there were hardly any to be bought anywhere, a movement quickly arose of people making their own masks. Every day on TV, new initiatives were introduced where people created such masks and how much fun it was. And so today, all wear masks (in many colors and shapes). A picture to remember! One might get the impression that we got used to this new kind of protection rather quickly. As the elderly and people with pre-existing illnesses belong to a high-risk group, there were soon initiatives to offer assistance, for example to buy groceries, walk the dog or do other essential things for them.

How does the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren and its congregations react to the pandemic? Like all events, worship services are forbidden, as well as all events where people might gather at any one place. What used to be almost unthinkable a few years ago now seems almost normal. People meet digitally, virtually for worship, for coffee hour, for bible study and for preachers' conventions. Yes, much was transported from real life into the electronic world - that quite a few, but far from all people have access to. A few years ago, our Church established a common e-mail-address matching our web site: www.e-cirkev.cz. *Církev* means *Church* and *e* stands for *protestant/evangelical* as well as for *electronic*. And that is the very aspect we take very seriously these days.

Our webpage has never seen so much activity as in these weeks. Every morning since March 17, you can hear morning devotion on the webpage – including prayer, Bible passage and blessing. These devotions are created by ministers of our Church and they are introduced by a nice picture of the ministers. By now you can listen to 30 devotions at any time. They let us experience some of the diversity in our Church. Also there is a daily evening prayer written by lay people. These two kinds of devotions form a beautiful combination. It is a pity that all of this is only in Czech, so than you may not get much out of it, unless you understand Czech. But it is still worthwhile to take a look at the webpage just to see how one prayer leads to another, with happy life-positive ministers and lay-people.

But that isn't all. There are many online worship offers by individual congregations with a multitude of technical possibilities: worship on video; live streamings on Sunday morning with sound and vision or only sound. Many scripts for worshipping or praying at home: sermons, bible readings, prayers. There are prayer bridges in congregations and online-café's. Imagination can only be hindered by the limits of technology.

I substituted for our minister in the German language congregation in the Church of St. Martin in the Wall and experienced myself how we worshiped first via Skype then Zoom, which really made a new kind of encounter possible. We had to switch from Skype to Zoom when too many people joined in. Last Sunday, we had 36 Computers logged-in; meaning about 80 people in Prague and elsewhere in Europe participated. And that was the totally new thing: former members of the congregation, relatives or friends of our congregation could join wherever they were. From 10.10 am, the service is set up and all can join in, with word and image. We can send greetings and exchange news and talk about how we feel in these strange days. At 10.30, devotion starts and takes about 30 minutes and is broadcast from 4 different homes. The curator welcomes all and is responsible for the announcements. One family makes music, plays and sings hymns for all to sing along. In another home someone reads the Bible passages and from the fourth home comes the liturgy and the sermon. During worship, only those who contribute are broadcasting. After worship, all are able to speak with each other again in a kind of digital coffee hour. If worship has to happen online, it is a wonderful experience to be thus connected with one another, in listening to the word of God, in hymns and prayer.

There is even more to be found on the web page, talks of Church personalities, presentations for adults, for children and teenagers. Everybody can find something. With a little patience. I found a video of a minister casually telling what it means to him to celebrate worship. All very relaxed. Maybe a good portal for people, who know very little about the Church. Like the annual calendar where ministers tell (often humorous) stories from their daily lives as ministers - with a smile and admitting that ministers are only human. Now all contributions are being read aloud which makes the calendar ever more lively. It is often fun to listen to.

The webpage of our church is a little treasure chest that has much to offer. I can only hope that it is much used by many. Gone are the days, when our webpage was just something to read, now you can watch and listen as well.

There is also a link to the *Diakonie* (charity work) of our church. Under the header „We are with you in times of crisis“, you find links where you can volunteer to help or ask for help; crisis phone numbers where people in all of the Republic can call and a map with the various places that offer help. A good address in times of need.

But what happens in our congregations besides virtual offers? I know there are telephone services trying to phone all those in the congregation who are known to be alone or sick or in need of help in any way. And yes, people are also sewing face masks.

After 5 weeks in lockdown, on April 20th, there were the first tries to open up a little - in sports, at schools. A few activities are allowed again. The Czech government says the situation in our Republic looks positive and stresses that we do not want a situation like that in Italy or Spain and that was why restrictions were so harsh. Indeed, compared to other countries, we have had fewer infected (about 7000) and relatively few deaths by Covid-19 (about 200). Our government is proud of that. Even the opposition played along with the regulations. But this is changing now. There are discussions to end the restrictions. In the meantime the House of Representatives has decided to prolong the state of emergency until 17 May. Smaller opposition parties are having the government's steps checked by law; whether it was legally ok to close borders as rigorously as it was done. Of course government and parliament are also busy thinking of ways to help people and the economy who suffer from the restrictions to prevent the spread of Corona virus. This is a wide field and too difficult to describe in this short report. The situation of a total lockdown from one day to the next has been depressing and is an existential threat to many people. Tourism for example plays a major role not just in Prague. That restaurants and hotels are closed, matters to many people working there. Of course they ask when borders may be open again, so tourists can return. There is much speculation. Every so often a politician says this might take a year or even two before life can go back to normal with people commuting and travelling freely. Commuters already enjoy a little relief at the borders but all else is unsure. As of now there are plans to ease restrictions a little more every two weeks. Worship may be allowed again in person and in churches starting May 3 but with only max 15 people, 30 by May 17. On Pentecost on May 31, there may be 50 people. Normal worship with as many as wish to come is supposed to possible on June 14. All this of course always under the condition that the numbers of newly infected are not increasing much. And of course all this with additional requirements such as distances between people of 2 meters, face masks, disinfecting hands ...

Our Moderator Daniel Ženatý gave us a motto: „VÍRU SI CHRAŇ, VIRU SE BRAŇ!“ in English „Save your faith and save yourself from the virus.“ *The words for faith and for virus sound very similar in Czech. I could not find a similar pun in English or German.* But this is what it is all about in these strange times: That we can save our faith in this odd situation. This is a challenge, even knowing that God is with us even now. We need to save and protect ourselves as well as others from infection. And yet there is something else we need to save ourselves from: the fear that takes our breath away, the fear of our neighbor who might suddenly be dangerous. We have to save ourselves from letting this crisis fog up our faith and our thinking. The pandemic will be an immense challenge for a long time – globally - and for the churches. Let us take on this challenge together.

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