

Pressure on the Churches in Czechoslovakia

FROM A CORRESPONDENT

During the last year the situation of the Churches in Czechoslovakia has become increasingly difficult. The State is trying to confine all "Christian" activity to the individual congregations and Christian families. There is now little contact between the denominations: permission is necessary for a minister to address a congregation other than his own even within each denomination; lectures, concerts, etc., can only be held if authorized by the State; three months' notice has to be given should a foreign visitor wish to speak to a congregation. At the moment some sixteen Catholic priests, twelve pastors of the Czechoslovak Church and twelve pastors of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren have had their licences taken away.

Many of us have been in close contact with the group of Czech pastors and theologians known as the New Orientation. They form a renewal group within the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren and are pledged among other things to work for "Socialism with a human face". Two of the leading members of the group, Pastor Alfred Kocab of Mlada Boleslav and Pastor Jacob Trojan of Libis, are the latest to have had their licences withdrawn. Pastor Kocab is Chairman of the Peace Committee of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, and Pastor Trojan officiated at the funeral of Jan Palach, who burnt himself to death in 1969 as a protest against the Soviet occupation.

The events leading up to the dismissal of these two men include the following. In the late summer of 1973 Pastor Trojan addressed the Peace Committee, which is loosely associated with the Synodical Council of his Church, on the theme "Exploitation of man in history, theology and economics". His examples were taken from East and West alike. The lecture was tape-recorded without his knowledge and the tape given to the State authorities also without his consent. Some fifteen of the thirty or so present are known to have been questioned by the secret police. The tape was eventually sent to Pastor Trojan three months later. Last October the Synodical Council issued a general statement "to those very able and intelligent brethren in our Church who seek to impose too great a burden

on their fellow pastors and Christians". This was clearly a warning to the New Orientation to cease making any statements of a political nature.

Just before Christmas President Heinemann of West Germany visited the Czechoslovak president in Prague. Pastor Kocab and Pastor Trojan sent letters to both presidents stating that in the present atmosphere of European détente the threatened position of the Churches in Czechoslovakia was surely an anomaly.

The announcement that the two pastors were to lose their licences was dated 16 January 1974 – the fifth anniversary of Jan Palach's self-immolation. In 1971 the secret police tried to make Pastor Trojan confess that he had persuaded Jan Palach to commit suicide, something of which he was totally innocent. Under Czechoslovak law, if a crime is not detected within five years after it has been committed the offender cannot then be punished.

Both pastors are contesting their dismissal which they regard as illegal. In this they are supported by their own and other congregations. The State pays clergy salaries and no clergyman can hold an appointment without a State licence. However, it is questionable whether the State can legally terminate appointments in such an arbitrary fashion. On this occasion the announcement simply states that neither pastor is considered to be a suitable person to hold a licence for preaching. The decree takes effect on 28 February, and neither pastor will receive a salary from that date.

At a recent association of pastors' meeting in North Bohemia, Pastor Mundeck Bauer of Libehovice spoke in support of Pastor Kocab and Pastor Trojan. He has also written letters to Church and State authorities. As a result he has been severely reprimanded and threatened with the withdrawal of his licence.

The last services conducted by Pastor Trojan and Pastor Kocab were held on Sunday, 24 February. Both churches were full and messages of sympathy and support were read out together with verbal tributes. The presbyters at Libis received a letter from the Synod stating that if they encouraged Pastor Trojan to continue his work in defiance of the ban they too would be dismissed. Attached to the letter was a copy of the Synodical Council's statement referred to earlier. The presbyters are elected by the congregation and it is doubtful whether they can be legally dismissed.

Previously when a pastor has been dismissed, an administrator has been appointed who was acceptable to the congregation. The Libis congregation asked that Mrs. Trojan, who is also a pastor, might be their administrator, but this has been refused on the grounds that she

would merely carry out her husband's wishes. A retired minister has been appointed without consulting the congregation, as is their right. Although the decree of 16 January states that the two pastors could move to another area, they both doubt that they would regain their licences if they moved to different parishes. Pastor Kocab has in fact been told that his licence would be restored if he promises to keep 'quiet. He finds this condition quite unacceptable.

For the present both families can remain in their clergy houses. Since there are some thirty congregations without pastors, partly as a result of the dismissals, it seems unlikely that other pastors will be found to care for the congregations in the near future. On the other hand Libis and Mlada Boleslav are attractive parishes and there may ultimately be pressure to fill them. So both pastors face very uncertain futures.

Pastor Kocab's wife is a psychiatrist and used to work with maladjusted children in Mlada Boleslav. However, in the last two years she has been under constant pressure because the State claims that as a Christian she cannot help her patients to adjust to an atheistic society. She was eventually dismissed and is now allowed to work in a mental hospital outside the town which involves much travelling. She greatly preferred working with children.

The Trojans' elder child is just finishing her studies at Gymnasium. Although she has top marks in all her subjects it is doubtful whether she will be able to study medicine as she wishes. The decision to allow her to enter university is based not on her own academic ability but on the political acceptability of her parents to the State. There are eleven other pupils in the school who are in a similar position – not all are Christians.

Those pastors who lose their licences are limited in the choice of alternative employment. In the eyes of the State they are only fit to undertake menial tasks. Jiri Weber drives a hospital car, Vladimir (Mirec) Dus is a lift-boy in a Prague Hotel. Ladislav Heydanek is night watchman in a library, Jan Simsa, who is in poor health, works as a cowherd. Jan Dus is at present working as a storeman in a factory in Plzen, although now he is looking for a job in Melnik as he and his family are living in part of the Libis clergy house and Mrs. Dus is employed as the church caretaker. All of them and their wives have had their passports withdrawn.

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