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DYNAMIZING EVANGELICAL WITNESS IN POST-COMMUNIST ERA

Evangelical Theological Education: A Topical Problem in Post-Communist Slovakia

Evangelical School of Theology in Wroclaw (Poland), as a host institution of the 2012 Overseas Council International Institute for Excellence in Christian Leadership Development, has invited us to discuss a topical problem that urges European theological institutions to reflect upon their origins, development to present time and the future. It indeed touches an important Slovak topic as well. The „religious market“ is quite significant there. The development of churchmanship over the last three censuses can be traced in the table 1 (see p. 133).

In this presentation we are going to trace important presuppositions, beginnings and rise of evangelical witness in the Slovak post-communist era as understood in the perspective of higher theological education. We perceive the period of the last twenty years as quite dynamic one. According to our researches over the last twenty years, we may say that the development of evangelical witness in Slovakia has been significantly supported by the complex issues related to higher theological education. We would like to share with you some of the crucial issues of that process.

We are aware of the specifics so important to each single country. This presentation therefore has no ambition to give advice to others. It is quite obvious that

the dynamism of evangelical witness in other European post-communist countries would be determined or conditioned by their matters related to local conditions, history and culture.

My part is to tackle some general facts of evangelical education as a factor of evangelical witness dynamism in Slovakia. However, I will not be presenting the book *Dynamizing Evangelical Witness in Post-Communist Era*, that appeared in 2008 as result of a research project by the Association of Evangelical Churches; rather, I want to grasp some crucial aspects afresh from the year 2012 perspective. Following this presentation, Docent Dr Masarik will share the theme by focusing our attention at present situation of the higher theological training at Banská Bystrica with a glance into the future.

Considering „Slovak Issue“

Churches, theological education, and evangelical witness — all those matters exist in an environment that cannot be neglected. They either support or interfere with national identity of people in particular geopolitical area. Slovak national identity is a quite typical phenomenon in the region of Central Europe, characterized by a complex, delicate, and constantly changing intersection of political, ethnic, national, linguistic, religious, cultural borders, and contexts, producing various competing collective identities. The modern Slovak nation is a political construction of the 19th century intellectuals that responded to the then needs how to secure the feelings of protection in the time of modernization. At that time, all the traditional values, such as like patriarchal family, religion, professional division of society, were challenged.

Historical aspects of so called „Slovak issue“ are the followings:

1. Peripheral location (not in the center nor in the crossroad but on the verge of the influence of great empires, cultures and civilizations).
2. Experiences from the integration into multinational states.
3. Deformation of the Slovak society during the time of modernization (Hungarian oppression and obstruction of the formation of Slovak educated middle class, centralization and the reduction of self-rule, discrimination up to elimination of ethnic, religious and social groups in the 20th century) what resulted in a formation of a large plebeian classes and values with a tendency towards radical rhetoric.
4. All that caused cultural and economic backwardness merging at the feeling or a complex of pettiness, inferiority, second-ratedness.

These aspects profoundly influenced the accumulation of cultural capital that must be built up over generations in every nation and is of basic significance for

the state and fate of the society.

For politicians, therefore, there is a task to assure Slovaks that they are a complex national entity equivalent to other nations (with their own constitution, parliament, government, law courts, foreign politics, school system, mass media, symbols, sport representation, and so on). This process of the formation of national identity has not been accomplished by the birth of the Slovak Republic in 1993. On the contrary, in the context of European integration processes, it finds itself in a double tension:

1. A tension caused by contradiction between „localism and globalism“ — a big enough state is not able to solve the problems of regional differentiation by bureaucratic ways and, on the other hand, a too small state unable to reach solo solutions of international economic and ecological problems.

2. A tension — typically Slovak one! — defined as a tension between the tradition of the nation and the national state as an element of the right for the self-rule on one hand and the political course towards the formation of mutual transnational space on the other hand.

For churches and theological education, it is important to know that there is a considerable disproportion: national self-esteem in Slovakia is strongly connected with nation's history and culture. It is not strongly connected with values such as social justice, or equality of chances, or social benefits systems, or functional democracy. Therefore one would expect a strong support of culture and religion. In fact, researches have shown that the areas of culture, religion and ethnic minorities have been subjects of cut downs in the state budget.

Slovak Evangelicals and Education in the Post-Communist Period

I had the privilege to be one of those who started multi-denominational discussions on theological education after the political change in 1989. In the beginning of them, there were ideas of various models of church seminaries in Slovakia or solutions by joining Czech institutions of theological education. However, over the discussions it was made clear that churches were looking for quality theological education and, the sought-after training center should also become a platform for scholarly exchange of views. Evangelicals wanted to examine such areas as:

- identifying possibilities and limits of the small evangelical denominations as to their influence upon the society;
- marking out the pre-requisitions for an effective tasks fulfillment through preaching, teaching, and pastoral caring;
- uncovering dynamic preaching attributes;

— disclosing theoretical, practical, and socio-cultural aspects of contemporary conditions for evangelization and mission¹.

Evangelical Christians are scattered in various churches. However, there have been the whole denominations that embraced evangelical theology and wanted their candidates for ordination to be trained in an evangelical school of theology. That appeared clear at the close of the year 1992 when it became clear that Czechoslovakia would split into two separate states. Prior to that time, evangelicals were sending students to either ecumenical university-based schools of theology in both Czech and Slovak part of the federation. None of those was evangelical in their theological basis. There were several quite young non-university evangelical theological institutions in the Czech part of Czechoslovakia, non in Slovakia. Emerging new political situation was giving no guarantee that after the split of Czechoslovakia the possibility to send student to Czech theological schools would continue. That gave one stimulus to start thinking of a new solution of evangelical theological training in Slovakia. The other one was keeping in mind the „Slovak issue” as described above. Slovak mentality is different from the Czech one. It became clear: Should the new solution of evangelical education be effective to serve evangelical dynamism, it must be local, optimally with indigenous Slovak pedagogues and a high quality education must be a priority.

The previous experiences of all the denominations under communist rule were marked by a style of religious life that was somewhat similar to the one of the primitive church. A new post-communist era has brought new needs. It was no longer felt satisfying for churches to send forth pastors with insufficient training. There was a strong impression in the small membership evangelical churches in Slovakia that the new period in the history of Slovakia should also mean a new period in the history should open new chapters in theological education. First, an idea of an evangelical Bible school was up. Following discussions of the top church representatives of the Baptist Union, Evangelical Methodist Church, Free Evangelical Church, the Apostolic Church, Brethren Assemblies, and mission movements AD 2000 and the New Eastern Europe for Christ, it was clear that finances would not allow implementing such a project. Moreover there was a strong wish to find a way to any form of university-based higher theological institution that would best serve the above mentioned needs of evangelicals.

The Lord has opened such a way in Banská Bystrica. Local university was developing its structures. One of the plans was to establish a theological department there. The name of Matej Bel in the name of the university signified it should be

¹ That is why the project *Dynamizing Evangelical Witness in Post-Communist Era*, completed in 2008, explored especially these four areas.

a protestant department of theology. The leaders understood it is a call from God to take this chance. Therefore they organized a summit of evangelical representatives in Banská Bystrica in December 1992. The result of the summit was that all of them have taken „the courage to be” one in education. The tool to implement that great plan was to speak with one voice. Therefore the summit decided to organize The Association of the Evangelical Churches in Slovakia.

The Association of Evangelical Churches in Slovakia and Department of Evangelical Theology and Mission Formation

The decisive role for the things that came played the dispositions of evangelical leaders. Their mutual understanding and ambition to serve best in the changed society had led them to cooperation. Of course, there also was lack of resources, both human and financial, to start an institution of higher theological education on their own. But without a step beyond denominational pride the Association of Evangelical Churches in Slovakia (AEC) would not come to existence in January 1993. Since that time, it has been repeatedly indicated as the work of the Holy Spirit. It opened the way to the Faculty of Education, Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica to create the Department of Evangelical Theology and Mission (DETM). First students started their study programs in September 1993.

The main mission of the AEC is to support educational formation of the preachers, mission workers and teachers of Christian religion at DETM, Matej Bel University, Faculty of Education in Banská Bystrica. The AEC helps the economy of the DETM by churches' membership fees. The money is spent mainly in a way that helps finance publishing activities, conferences and study projects. Building expenses, salaries, and facilities are financed from the public budget. The AEC over the years also organized educational and evangelization projects in churches as well as in public. It has the ambition to cooperate with theological seminaries and schools in Slovakia and abroad to organize projects in churches and in public life. It also helps organize professional, theological, and scientific conferences in order to support educational formation of leading spiritual workers, diaconal-social workers as well as workers for crisis situations in the society (natural catastrophes, terrorism, wars, and the like).

The Statute of the AEC is also documenting a strong and unique desire of all the involved parties to do their best to reach the desired goals. Each member church takes part in the AEC committee meetings, submits proposals for the main AEC goals at annual planning of tasks, checks spiritual level of the AEC schools as well as reviews the AEC economics and administration. Each one assumes responsibilities: taking part in the realization of the main AEC goals and tasks, caring

for the recruitment of the students and teachers of the schools as well as supporting them according to their needs; looking for sponsors; contributing financially for the needs of the AEC according to the given projects. In relation to the DETM the AEC's committee appoints and discharges the director as well as administration, approves the principles for the teaching curriculums, denotes the rules for the selection of teachers and approves their personal occupation according to the valid regulations of the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic, designates the rules for the recruitment of students. The AECS committee is made up by commissioned representatives of the member churches, two for each church. The decision making process honors each member in such a way that up to now, if any member denomination disagreed with any proposed solution, the committee was not using the right of the majority. Consensus is highly valued and practiced.

Educational Trends at DETM's Mission

The mission statement as well as the core values of DETM point to the needs of evangelical churches in Slovakia and in interested countries. Churches in the Czech Republic, Ukraine, Serbia, Rumania, and other countries have been sending students to study at DETM. The mission statement and core values also reflect the need to develop printed resources for direction and growth of evangelical churches. That assumes ongoing theoretical investigations, empirical research, and scholarly production as well as re-valuation and checking of teaching plans according to current needs of churches.

The first trend has been to question the way how evangelical higher education uses academic freedom. Academic education should not be isolated from the church life. That encourages cooperating more closely with churches and researching in churches empirically in order to keep vital contact with churches. The curriculum and research plans had to be under permanent interactions with churches.

The second trend has been a requirement for an interdisciplinary dialogue within university training. Traditionally, church-related higher education was distinctly tackling issues and answering questions different from those relevant for social, political, and economic life of people. Current graduates are expected to be ready to serve in any church position thanks to their being trained in a variety of disciplines. The faith communities are looking for those practitioners who are able and competent to become new apologists in an environment of an informed society.

The third trend in the education at DETM has been to turn attention to information. Numerous writers² have pointed to the crucial role of accessibility to information. The classical libraries only no longer satisfy this need. A continual development of IT and a growing computer and internet literacy of both faculty and students is the condition to keep up church-relating education in this world that has already become a „global village” foreseen by McLuhan long before. Modern communication technologies such as radio, television, cell phone technology, and internet globalize communication by allowing users from all levels of society around the world to easily connect with each other and exchange ideas instantaneously. Church-related education therefore should get rid of provincialism and partial significance.

DETM has been responding to these three trends in several ways. Through permanent interaction with churches through the AEC as well as through personal visitations of the pedagogues to local churches, it responds to the first trend.

The second trend has been reflected by regular reviews of both curriculum and study subjects. The regular re-accreditations take place in four year intervals. Re-accreditation is considered to be a new accreditation. That is a challenge for HE institutions to reconsider their study programs. Besides every year DETM is making minor modifications of the subjects by introducing latest study literature as well as reviewed requirements for practical experience of the students. The cognition, ministry skills, and the development of students' Christian character are three focused areas. Interdisciplinary dialog is accessible thanks to DETM's university setting at the Faculty of Education.

The third trend points toward the area of information technology and to the Bologna process. It is of course not enough just to say that each pedagogue and student got access to a PC and internet connection. DETM needs to pay better attention to the development of the skills to use this technology. It will be necessary to invest more financial means in order to open access to paid web pages with necessary sources.

All of the study programs at DETM have from the beginning been part of public educational system in Slovakia which accepted the Bologna process. It is an

² See: W.O. Crews, *Trends in Theological Education: Seminary for the 21st Century* (2006). <http://www.ggbts.edu/events/crabtree10.html> [accessed 23.07.2008]; M. Elliott, *Post-Soviet Protestant Theological Education: Come of Age?* „The Asbury Theological Journal” 1999, vol. 54, no. 2, p. 37–40; M.W. Kohl, *Current Trends in Theological Education*. „International Congregational Journal. A Future with a Past” 2001, vol. 1, p. 26–40; L.C. Wanak, *Theological Education and the Role of Teaching in the 21st Century: A Look at the Asia Pacific Region*. „Cyberjournal for Pentecostal Charismatic Research” 2001, <http://www.pctn.org/cyberj/wanak.html> [accessed 23.07.2008]; D.D. Philips, *Trends in Theological Education in The Anglican Church of Canada. Ministry Matters. Focus on Theological Education* (2001). <http://www.anglican.ca/mm/2000/spring/mm09.html> [accessed 23.07.2008].

attempt to unify and to make consistent requirements, language, formatting, and programs in the European University system. Through a common understanding and practice of transferring credits (ECTS) and in uniformity in the number of years required for degree completion, the training system of the DETM has met the expectation of the Bologna process and became part of the „European Higher Education Area”.

Each student finishes with the accredited final state exams³. The Chair and the members of the Committee for the state exams are nominated by DETM and approved by the Dean of the Faculty of Education. These exams consist of:

Written degree thesis which developed by the student according to topics agreed upon by DETM and chosen by the student and his/her advisor. The topic for the master's degree thesis must be different from that one submitted for the bachelor's degree. The evaluation of the final written thesis is made by both the advisor and an opponent. A student must defend the thesis in a discussion over the evaluations.

Oral exams follow the successful defense of the thesis. They have a colloquial character as required by the Bologna. After successful passing the exams, the Chair of the Committee informs the Dean of the Faculty who gives approval to issue the Bachelor's or Master's Graduate Degree Diploma.

Work of the DETM (now called Department of Theology and Christian Education) in Slovakia has been quite successful and meaningful phenomenon in the evangelical witness dynamics. I hope the presentation of Doc. Dr Albín Masarik will do the evidence to it.

Rozwój wiary ewangelikalnej w dobie postkomunistycznej

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Autor przedstawia sytuację szkolnictwa ewangelikalnego na tle sytuacji postkomunistycznej Słowacji. Sytuacja wyznaniowa w kraju o znacznej większości katolickiej różni się jednak od polskiej. Po latach władzy komunistycznej nastąpiło bowiem znaczne osłabienie słowackiego katolicyzmu i wzrost liczby osób deklarujących się jako bezwyznaniowe. Z drugiej strony wyznaniowa mapa Słowacji obfituje w licznie reprezentowane tutaj wyznania chrześcijańskie (do najliczniejszych należą: luteranie, grekokatolicy, prawosławni i ewangelicy reformowani). Na tym tle Kościoły ewangelikalne stanowią około

³ The law on universities the Act no. 131/2002 provides for end requires that all institutions of higher education respect it. Details on subjects and examinations and prospective number of credits at DETM are to be found at the school's web site and partly in the above mentioned article by D. Hanesova, *The Educational Role of Church-Maintained Education in Slovakia after 1989*. In: *Education and Church in Central- and Eastern-Europe at First Glance*. Debrecen 2008, p. 54–71 as well.

1 proc. wierzących, przy czym statystyki odnotowują ich stały rozwój (np. wolne Kościoły w ciągu dwóch lat odnotowały ponad dwukrotny przyrost wiernych). Sytuację wewnętrzną komplikuje zarówno wieloetniczność Słowacji, jak również silne powiązanie poczucia tożsamości religijnej i etnicznej. Wychodzenie z komunizmu w przypadku Słowacji utrudnia również peryferyjne położenie oraz długotrwała sytuacja zależności od zewnętrznych ośrodków władzy. Na tak zarysowanym tle ważną rolę odgrywa Instytut Teologii i Katechetyki Uniwersytetu im. Macieja Beli w Bańskiej Bystrzycy. Instytut prowadzi działalność edukacyjną w porozumieniu z poszczególnymi denominacjami ewangelikalnymi oraz — co wynika z jego charakteru — państwem słowackim. Do pewnego stopnia można więc twierdzić, że jest państwową placówką prowadzącą edukację teologiczną na potrzeby społeczności ewangelicznie wierzących chrześcijan. Przy tym studiują na nim nie tylko słuchacze ze Słowacji, ale również z Czech, Ukrainy, Mołdawii i Rumunii, co sytuuje jego działalność edukacyjno-misyjną w szerokim kontekście środkowoeuropejskim.

Total resident population	Slovak Republic					
	2011		2001		1991	
	Number	in %	Number	in %	Number	in %
	5 397 036	100.0	5 379 455	100.0	5 274 335	100.0
<i>Religion</i>						
Roman Catholic Church	3 347 277	62.0	3 708 120	68.9	3 187 383	60.4
Greek Catholic Church	206 871	3.8	219 831	4.1	178 733	3.4
Orthodox Church	49 133	0.9	50 363	0.9	34 376	0.7
Lutheran Church	316 250	5.9	372 858	6.9	326 397	6.2
Reformed Christian Church	98 797	1.8	109 735	2.0	82 545	1.6
Tehovah's Witnesses	17 222	0.3	20 630	0.4	10 501	0.2
United Methodist Church	10 328	0.2	7 347	0.1	4 359	0.1
Brethren Assemblies	7 720	0.1	6 519	0.1	700	0.0
Apostolic (Assemblies of God)	5 831	0.1	3 905	0.1	1116	0.0
Baptist Union	3486	0.1	3 562	0.1	2 465	0.0
Seventh Day Adventists	2 915	0.1	3 429	0.1	1 721	0.0
Free Evangelical Church	3 396	0.1	3 217	0.1	1861	0.0
Slovak Jewish Union	1999	0.1	2 310	0.0	912	0.0
Old Catholic Church	1687	0.0	1 733	0.0	882	0.0
Czechoslovak Hussite Church	1782	0.0	1696	0.0	625	0.0
New Apostolic Church	166	0.0	22	0.0	188	0.0
Baha'i Faith	1065	0.0	-	-	-	-
Mormon Church	972	0.0	58	0.0	91	0.0
Another kinds	23 340	0.5	6 214	0.1	6 094	0.1
Churchless	725 362	13.4	697 308	13.0	515 551	9.8
Unidentified	571 437	10.6	160 598	3.0	917 835	17.4

Table 1. Inhabitants of the Slovak Republic according to religion – censuses in years 2011, 2001, 1991⁴.

⁴ Source: <http://www.scitanie2011.sk/wp-content/uploads/Tab.-141.pdf> [accessed 16 July 2012].

