The Lutheran Church and Society in Slovakia during the Cold Wars

Július Filo
Comenius University

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree
Part of the Christianity Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol32/iss2/1

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University.
THE LUTHERAN CHURCH AND SOCIETY IN SLOVAKIA
DURING THE COLD WAR
(With special attention to the role of the Christian World Community)

by Július Filo

Prof. Th. Dr. Július Filo, Dr.h.c. is Chair of the Practical Theology of the Evangelical
Theological Faculty of Comenius University, Bratislava, Slovakia. This paper was
presented as part of an international research conference on Christian World Community
and the Cold War, September 5-8, 2011, hosted by the Evangelical Theological Faculty
of Comenius University, and along with other papers, edited by Norman Hjelm & Dwain
Epps, was published through the university as the first volume of a projected series.

Abstract
This paper explores how and to what extent the Lutheran Church in Slovakia living and
seeking to fulfill its mission in a socialist political context governed by the Communist party was
encouraged or sustained by its involvement in the global Christian community. Our church was
a founding member of the World Council of Churches, the Lutheran World Federation and the
Conference of European Churches. During the years of the Cold War our church was able to
maintain contact with churches and Christians on the other side of the global political divide
through other Christian bodies as well, like the “Gustav Adolf Werk” and the “Martin Luther
Bund” in the Federal Republic of Germany and other ecumenical and evangelical networks.

It first describes the context: state-church relations and the means by which the state sought
to control the churches, on the one hand, and the content and extent of public and unofficial
activities of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Slovakia during this period on
the other.

It relies on two main sources. The first is through research into the public statements, the
church press and the reports of the Church’s decision-making bodies and by collecting personal
recollections and testimonies of the surviving witnesses of the period and comparing the two. It
also reviews press reports and statements that record the positive impact of our faithful of our
uninterrupted involvement in ecumenical organizations and our own world Christian Communion.

The study shows how these organizations became bridges of mutual communication
despite the limitations imposed during the Cold War. Though they were under close surveillance
by different forces, these bridges were effective and served the purposes of the Kingdom of God
brought to this world by Jesus Christ. It also demonstrates that the impact of these relationships
were not always immediately obvious. Their fruits were often harvested later, in due time. During
and after our liberation from totalitarian political systems and the animosity of the Cold War, many
of those who walked across those bridges to maintain communion with others contributed to the
construction of a new era out of their experiences of being part of the World Christian Community.

An Introduction
Let me first explain my motivation for choosing this topic and how I attempt to approach
it. The Evangelical Church of Augsburg Confession in Slovakia, my home church, which I call in
this paper “Lutheran” because of the usual way of addressing our church in an English-speaking
environment, has experienced the reality of the Cold War from its eastern side. As a consequence
of the Yalta agreement\textsuperscript{1} and then of the democratic elections in Czechoslovakia in 1946, in which the winner in the Czech part of the republic was the Communist party and in the Slovak part the Democratic party\textsuperscript{2}, our country lived under a socialist system led by the Communist party from February 1948, and its leading role was inscribed in our state constitution.

Our church together with other Christian churches sought during this period and under difficult conditions to fulfill our mission, the mandate entrusted to us by the Triune God. And we can say, in the words of the LWF Mission statement, The Triune God has fulfilled its mission in our churches during this period\textsuperscript{3}. We see its fruits, not least in the spiritual condition in which the church and other churches have survived the experience of an oppressive totalitarian political system with its fundamentally negative attitude to Christianity and religious faith in general. I shall address some of these signs in my study.

The main question addressed here is: how and to what extent was this mission of our church encouraged or directly supported by its participation in of the worldwide Christian community as a founding member of the World Council of Churches, the Lutheran World Federation and the Conference of European Churches? How was our church helped to relate to Christian communities on the other side of a divided world during this period by organizations like the Gustav-Adolf-Werk, the Martin-Luther-Bund and other ecumenical and evangelical networks?

I seek answers to these questions through two interrelated approaches: First, to research public statements, the church press and reports from the decision-making conventions of the church during that period; and second, to gather the personal memories and testimonies of the witnesses of the period. I shall then compare these with the public press and reports of the church. Because of the limited time and space we have made “test drills” into a few selected periods and evaluated them in their respective socio-political contexts. In addition to it I shall highlight and analyze a small number of typical events, which illustrate the kinds of developments of which we were a part.

These latter analyses are also in the form of personal testimony. I will not be able to base all my findings on published facts. Thus, for transparency, I give here in a footnote some biographical references to my own faith journey and of my involvement in the mission of the Church in the time of the Cold War up to 1989.\textsuperscript{4}

1 Signed on February 11, 1945 at a conference convened in the final months of World War II on Yalta, Crimea, U.S.S.R., by the three main Allied leaders – U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin.

2 Parliamentary elections were held in Czechoslovakia on May 26, 1946. They were the last held in Czechoslovakia before Communists took power in 1948. They were also the second and least honest elections held in the Soviet bloc during the Cold War era. Giving the Party their needed rationale to take power.


4 I was born in 1950 into the family of an active Lutheran pastor. My father was elected bishop of the Eastern District of our Church in 1969. I shared the optimism of the “Prague spring” during my secondary school years. I do not remember any objections in my school times against my being a Christian, a pastor’s kid or any opposition to my decision to study theology. I attended religious education in the socialist public school offered by the pastor, my father. In secondary school I was formally a member of the Socialist Student Organization. After August 21, 1968, as deputy president of the socialist youth at school, I took part in the protests against the invasion of the troops of the Warsaw pact into Czechoslovakia and the suppression of the attempt to democratize socialism led by Alexander Dubček, a democratic communist with Lutheran roots. In 1969 my father was elected bishop from among four candidates in the active Eastern District. I could follow our church life through his eyes and experiences during his 25-year-long ministry as a bishop, including the unpublished side of the State-Church relations, struggles and hopes. I have never published any views to please communist rulers. I have worked at the Theological faculty since 1975. My international involvement before 1989 was as a participant in two meetings of the Youth Commission of the Christian Peace Conference delegated by the church;
State and Church Relations, 1948-1989

This period can be divided into several parts. The first four to five years was characterized on the grass-roots level by a continuing strong interest in the programs of the church. Its intensity was so strong, that the new rulers had to accept it and (according to my father) in many places of Slovakia there was no public event organized without a prayer and a pastor. Other witnesses of that period say that the coming of communism has been taken by many, especially the socially underprivileged, to be the beginning of the “Kingdom of Messiah”. Many comrades of that time were not antagonistic to the church and were from early on good church members, regularly attending services. There were many examples: e.g. Communist Party members have accepted roles in a Christian theatre play called “There is No Way Back” and took the roles of High Priests or even Judas. The state secretary for religious affairs installed by the communist government in the region of Liptovský Hrádok (a position established by the communist regime to control the church) understood his role as one of support, regularly attended worship services, paid church tax, and brought wood for the parsonage. He was a secretary for church affairs; therefore for a number of years he understood that he should serve the church. It took some time to reeducate the members of the Party to its atheistic ways and ideology.

The church press of this early period shows a keen interest in the life of churches abroad. In 1949 high representatives of the United Lutheran Church in America, including Dr. Franklin Clark Fry, visited our church together with Dr. P.O. Bersell. The church press reported extensively on church life in the USA. Similarly reports on missionary efforts from Sweden were published and theological discourses of Anders Nygren on the role of the church in a new time were printed. There was, for example, ample information on the election of the new Swedish archbishop Yngve Brilioth published in our church press. The article concludes with the hope: “May the cooperation started by Söderblom and Janoška of our churches in the ecumenical field have in the new archbishop not only a witness of this cooperation, but also a faithful follower.” There was also space for articles like one on “Freedom of religion in Soviet Union” (on the occasion of Stalin’s 70th birthday). The author congratulates Stalin on his birthday along with millions of other people in the world. Quoting the USSR constitution the author praises the decision on the consolidation of religious relations, which will have also an impact on our own state constitution: “In order to secure freedom of religion of the citizens, the church in the USSR is separated from the state and the school from the church. All the citizens have freedom of confession, of religious activities and freedom of anti-religious propaganda.” These antagonistic tendencies of that early part of the

---

7 Cirkevné listy 1949. p. 399ff.
8 District and General Bishop of our Church as of 1922
socialist period have been laid out also by the church press and foreshadowed coming events.

The political control of the church was started with the establishment of the State Office for Church Affairs in October 1949. The church press, without any discussion, published the text of this law establishing it.\(^{11}\)

The impact of the political changes was soon visible. In the years up to the nineteen-fifties and into the early sixties the persecution of the church and its coworkers was very severe. Many pastors of our church refused to accept the law number 218/1949, “On economic support of the church by the state,” that introduced on one hand the financing of the clergy salaries and central offices of the church by the state budget, but on the other hand contained provisions for harsh control of the church. Our church had to accept in its constitution state supervision over all personnel issues of the church. Communist rulers persecuted coworkers of the church, especially the clergy. In 1990 a Rehabilitation Commission of our church rehabilitated 29 pastors who in that period were jailed and punished by the court, 9 who were jailed and released without trial, 10 who were denied state permission to serve the church as pastors, 25 who were denied permission to serve in their own congregations but were allowed to go to another, and another 29 professors and students of our faculty who were affected by the persecution.\(^{12}\)

Politically speaking, we had great hope for the renewal of the church’s mission during the short period of the Prague Spring 1968, which was crushed by invading troops of the Warsaw Pact on August 21, 1968. The following period of so-called “normalization” was not easy not only for church but also for many reform-minded communists and their families. Some 150 000 citizens emigrated. Fortunately, the terrible oppression of the fifties was not repeated. The system of control continued or, we could say, was perpetuated.

Now when many witnesses of those times are leaving this world, we can only regret that more was not done before they died to evaluate their experiences. Many compared those years with 40 years of pilgrimage through the desert. But we know enough from them and others still among us to see that experiences of the public life of faith during those years differ very much, for the following reasons:

• The power of the Church and the effectiveness of the Church’s life differ from place to place and from region to region. We can however observe a kind of East – West asymmetry. In Eastern Slovakia, the Church’s life was and still is stronger. Basic family related values have higher importance. We could almost say: the closer to the boarder of Ukraine the more religious are the people. At the theological seminary during socialist years two thirds of the students came from the Eastern District of our Church which represented one third of the Church’s constituency. In some regions the Churches gave religious instruction also at schools since the state law permitted it. In other regions there were hardly any confirmations in the whole deanery. In 1982 according to the report of the General Convention there was one deannery in which there were only 12. Confirmands.\(^{13}\)

• There were different periods in our history. In some it was easier for the faith than in others. Most of the students who decided to study theology during this time faced difficulties. But there were places and periods in which this did not happen.

• The political rulers were sometimes cruel, in other times less so.

• Respective Christians’ experiences and their stories varied widely in relation to tribulations and difficulties and benefits of the faith. Reasons for this can be found in differing people’s

\(^{11}\) Cirkevné listy 1949. p. 396.
\(^{13}\) Zápisnica generálneho konventu 1982 s. 15.
personal perceptions of values, which count most, the benefits of the faith, the power of
God’s mercy, and the impact of the tests of the faith for the steadfastness of personal faith
and community in the church.

Control Mechanisms of the Socialist State Applied to the Churches
The life of the church in the socialist state was not only a matter of personal experience or
of personal ability to overcome evil through the good love of God. There were general legal
constraints that played an important role. Let me mention the most decisive ones.

The program of church activities was defined by the church’s constitution. It determined
how freedom of religion was understood in our church. During the whole Cold War time we
followed the constitution adopted in 1951. It had been written by church leaders of the previous,
democratic period, so many activities of a missionary nature were included in the rules for
congregational life: worship services in the homes, pastoral visits, Christian education in schools,
Bible studies for children and for youth after confirmation, Sunday school for Children, Bible
studies for adults.\(^\text{14}\) However diaconal work of the church was missing. The state had a monopoly
on social care. Its goal was to push the church into a position of a useless and socially ineffective
organization while the socialist state was strengthened in comparison, so as to look socially
effective and helpful. At ordination clergy promised to fulfill the program of the church laid out
in its constitution. It was important for the priests to know that the state had approved this
constitution.

Certainly there were common features to the reality of limitations and oppression, often
of a legal character. What were the legal proscriptions on Christians’ freedom to fulfill God’s
mission? How were they applied? What legal room was left for the public performance of the faith?
What risks did one have to accept in remaining faithful to the Lord in public?

The establishment of the State Office for Religious Affairs (law 217/1949) and the issuance
of the Law on the Financial Support of the Church through the State (218/1949) were two key
instruments of the systemic control over the church’s life. The church could only appoint or elect
clergy with the written permission of the state authority at the level of the state hierarchy
corresponding to the position. Even theological seminary admissions had to be approved by a state
secretary, even if this was not part of his legal duty. The clergy were State employees, of the
County’s National Committee, not of the church.

After ordination, the governmental gave beginning clergy a special introduction into the
ministry that imposed additional responsibilities of ministers that challenged the conscience of the
new minister. Article 19 of law 223 decreed on 18 October 1949 stipulated that in order to engage
in spiritual activity all clergy must swear an oath of allegiance to the Czechoslovak state that said,
in part, “I swear by my dignity and my conscience, that I will always stay faithful to the
Czechoslovak Republic and its peoples-democratic social order and I will not do anything which
goes against its interests, its security and its integrity…”\(^\text{15}\)

Secretaries for Church Affairs were installed at the county and regional levels and the
national Ministry for Culture to ensure compliance. Even a short-term period of service by a clergy
person from a neighboring congregation to substitute for a pastor during vacations had to be
approved in writing.

There was also an official surveillance of international relations, both of visitors coming

---

\(^{14}\) Ústava a štatúty Slovenskej evanjelickej cirkvi a.v. v ČSR. Bratislava. 1959.

hospodárskom zabezpečení cirkvi štátom. www.justice.sk jasp
to Czechoslovakia by representatives of the church abroad and of our participation in conferences abroad. For this purpose an office for the regulations of relations with foreign countries was established in the Federal Ministry of External Affairs in Prague.

Article 178 of the Penal Law stipulated that any violation or attempt to ignore or to escape state surveillance of the Churches was punishable by a fine or up to two years in jail.  But this was not enough. The Law 40/1974 of 24 April 1974 on the authority of the National Security Service introduced an additional form of surreptitious control.

Its main task was to protect the socialist social and state system, public order and socialist ownership of property, all according to the regulations of the Communist party of Czechoslovakia. Its task was to discover and root out the enemy activities or complicity and to abolish their root causes.

Since the churches were regarded by the socialist state to be the only ideologically public independent group in the nation, they were among the main targets of State Security. It had church affairs units in all the regions to ensure that the churches would not represent any risk to state security and integrity. Thus in this period there was established a regime of intense personal surveillance of church leaders and representatives by State Security.

**Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Slovakia Fulfilling its Mission under Communist Control**

It is important for the research goal of this study to show now the way, how a church fulfilled its mission during the time of limited opportunities. It is also important to see how the church dealt with its problems and how it shared and enjoyed its successes. The Church Constitution was the programmatic framework of the church. The main rule was: Everything, which is regular, can be continued; if it is an issue of personnel or it is an extraordinary activity, it has first to be approved by the state secretary for church affairs. Even the budget of the congregation and any construction or larger repairs of the church building was supposed to be subject to prior approval of the state authority. The main principle of the authorities was: the church in socialism exists to satisfy the religious needs of the people. Those, who do not have those needs any more should not be disturbed by the church. Any missionary effort and youth work was seen as not expected and the authorities tried to curb them.

**Official Public Activities granted by the Constitution of the Church and by Permissions received from the Authorities**

Evaluation of church activities was made by the church annually in its General Convention. The reports of these gatherings reviewed and analyzed the spiritual capacity of the church. Generally we can say that in most of the issues and cases, we see a continuing self-critical attitude of the bishops. Reports of the bishops differ in the realism and concreteness but still offer a good basis for evaluation.

The year 1983 observed Luther’s jubilee. The theme dominated the year and strengthened the Church. In this year Sunday worship attendance was estimated in the more active Eastern District as between 10 – 20%. The Bishop was not satisfied with this. Only in one deanery did the attendance at worship grow, but still we can say that after so many years of continuing

---

16 Ibid. S. 218.
18 which always gave rather precise information to the General Convention.
administrative limitations often going into oppression of the Church this result can be seen as a sign of the inner strength of the Church. The Eastern district also shows the number of members in this year. Congregations have in their membership lists 145,975 members.\(^{20}\) The whole church according to the congregation membership list had in the year 1981: 344,679 members.\(^{21}\) It is humiliating that 20 years later in 2003 after 15 years of freedom for church life and renewal of the church’s mission the number has dropped (or calculation made more real?) in the Eastern district to 109,626.\(^{22}\) The number of baptisms was 1981 and it was growing (In 2003: only 1357 baptisms). Children’s worship was carried out in the majority of the congregations, the report says. Bible study was held in about half of the congregations. There were 46 choirs active (in 2003, 119 choirs); confirmation was held in 2/3 of the congregations; altogether there were 1,167 confirmands in the Eastern district (In 2003: 1,610 confirmands). The worst complaints came in relation to the number of church weddings. There were 507 (in 2003: 549 weddings). The reports speak also about numerous repairs, building projects in all deaneries. “The General financial situation of our congregations is satisfactory, voluntary contributions are generally good which gives testimony to a living faith and love for our Evangelical Church,”\(^{23}\) testifies the bishop in his report.

An even more surprising picture comes when we see the work of the publishing house Tranoscius, which had to act via state run and controlled organization (church’s publishing house). The church magazine The Evangelical Messenger had been appearing in 19,992 copies in the year 1981 (now about half of that). Church Letters (Církevné listy) 1910 copies (now about a half of it). Služba slova (The ministry of the Word – homiletic journal) 581 copies\(^{24}\)

The worldwide community of churches has strongly supported our church as the complete Slovak Lutheran translation of the Bible was published by the United Bible Societies in London in 1979. This organization in cooperation with the LWF and its member churches (paper came as far as I know from Finland) donated to our church 50 000 Bibles. In 1981 after a year or a bit more 24,542 Bibles had already been sold.\(^{25}\) This also shows an activity of the faith and the great impact of the worldwide church community on our spiritual life.

The education of pastors, although diminished in numbers was not disrupted during this whole period. Here also the support of the worldwide communion has been visible and very important. After 1968 the number of students has grown and the tradition of studies abroad started again. Almost on a regular basis our students of theology studied in The German Democratic Republic in Leipzig, as of 1974. The Gustav Adolf Werk was very supportive in granting scholarships, accommodation and theological literature. I studied in Leipzig together with three colleagues. The example of the Church in Socialism in the GDR working with a greater degree of independence, its programs in youth work and diaconia inspired us and gave hope for our situation in Slovakia.

Every year a theological conference for the pastors was organized. It gave room for transmission of theological endeavors from abroad relating to our setting. Often the lectures analyzed great ecumenical events like the general assemblies of the WCC, LWF or CEC. There were usually three conferences with the same program offered every year in the fall in order to allow all the pastors to attend. We could say that more or less, all the pastors participated. The theological

\(^{25}\) General Bishop Ján Michalko gives even higher numbers in his report on p. 25

RELIGION IN EASTERN EUROPE XXXII, 2 (May 2012)
course, as it was called at that time, was one of the splendid opportunities to learn, meet, share and enjoy communion. The outside limits and danger pushed coworkers of the church together and the communion was appreciated. In 1981 there were 94 pastoral positions vacant, and 32 chaplaincy vacancies in 328 congregations of our Church.\textsuperscript{26} The need for more pastors was urgent.

The international contacts of the church were important. They were growing especially at the end of the period researched here, although they represented one of the most watched and controlled activities of the church. Official visits both ways had to be approved by the respective office in Prague. Nevertheless the report of the General Bishop regularly included reports about them. Besides more extensive reports on the General Bishop’s own activities during these visits there are also general summaries, which are encouraging. The General Bishop reported about 40 different international activities in 1981 at which members of our church, especially from the bishop offices and the theological faculty participated abroad. Our church received invitations and replied to not only larger conferences from the LWF, WCC and CEC but also to smaller consultations. Three pastors participated in theological training in Bavaria and in conjunction with the Luther Jubilee of 1983. Our theological faculty organized a bus excursion of professors and students to Luther sites in the GDR. The faculty in the year 1981 had 35 students and in the year 1982, 40.\textsuperscript{27} The Bishop expressed gratitude to the LWF in GDR (Dr. Zeddies and Tschoermer) and also to the state authorities. The report expresses gratitude for the possibility to send pastors to GDR, Hungary, Denmark and Finland for vacation.\textsuperscript{28} In this way also the church has received support through the communion of Churches. The selection of those who could participate in these contacts of course represents the critical dimension.

Obedience to God’s Great Commission for mission and growing activities of the church and international relations has brought more courage to ask for new possibilities. One example: in The General Convention of 1984 a student of theology and senior of the students, Ondrej Prostredník, asked in the plenary session for the possibility to organize a youth gathering of our church in the next year, 1985, which had been declared by UNO to be the international year of the youth. This proposal came after strong impressions from the Budapest LWF Assembly at which we participated in the Youth Preassembly, together with a group of 12 students of theology. The proposal has been supported by the enthusiastic speech of the inspector of my home congregation Mikuláš Gáfo,\textsuperscript{29} whom I had informed about this proposal prior to the meeting and asked him for his support. The state authorities reacted positively as the report about the proposal was brought to their attention. They even dared to admonish the church representative (gen. secretary Dr. O. L. Bartho has informed me about it) that the church should not say, that it was not up to now allowed to have a church wide youth gathering. “You have never asked for it till now”, they said. The meeting was held in 1985. Part of the thematic focus was on peace issues without any block political thinking. I have also participated in the meeting as the LWF staff member from Geneva. I would probably also say, that the political climate was gradually improving in the years after 1980 for the benefit of the churches.

Unofficial Activities Without Any State Control

There has not been any report published about this issue yet, which I want to describe briefly in this section. They would be often referred to as the activities of the underground

\textsuperscript{27} Zapisnica generálneho konventu. 1982. p. 64.
\textsuperscript{29} Zapisnica z Generálneho konventu. December 1984. p. 53.
The number and extent of them stays unrevealed yet. They show however, that God has empowered people to act even when they knew about the risk, which comes with it. The attractiveness of belonging together in the universal Church and the desire to let God act in our midst overcoming the limitations set by the alien political system, was the motivation. The existence of the official reports and international contacts, according to my opinion, has also helped to find courage for these unofficial or even, from the point of view of the socialist rulers, “subversive ways of cooperation” of the church coworkers. Activists who carried out these programs could by sentenced on the basis of the Penal Law for ignoring the state supervision over the churches’ work. Let me mention a few examples of what I mean.

During my ministry as the Spiritual Supervisor of students of theology (1976 – 1980) I was involved in several activities, which would most probably not be permitted if I would have asked for permission. I organized several times a student ski outing in the semester vacations. We were housed in the premises of the Socialist Youth recreation centre. Neither the dean of the theological faculty nor the owners of the premises in the mountains knew about it. 30 – 40 students participated every year. Growing communion and joy of belonging together was a result of it.

Once I was asked by a pastor, (who had already had difficulties with state authorities) to accept a bus excursion from their congregation to the student dormitory, which I was in charge of during the summer holiday. I knew that this would be risky. I agreed and again, we were protected from Above. The result was a growing communion.

The education of lay coworkers for youth work and Sunday school was not done publicly. The state authorities would not allow it. Schooling was done secretly in different locations. One of such we have organized with about 15 participants in the congregation in which I served as a pastor after 1980 was in Švätý Jur. Meetings were held in strict secrecy behind closed doors. The result was not only prepared lay coworkers, but also growing communion. Materials, which we used, came from abroad.

A children’s mission society from Switzerland disseminated materials for the children’s work secretly. These raised the quality of children’s work in the congregations.

Based on my growing contacts with youth workers from abroad through The Ecumenical Youth Council in Europe, there were two meetings of the decision making body of the youth work of the Bavarian Lutheran Church held in Švätý Jur in our parsonage. Youth pastor Gerhard Buckel became my friend and they found it thrilling to come with their Landesjugendkonvent to our country to officially meet. We found it encouraging.

The Impact of Belonging to the Worldwide International Christian Communion on the Life of the Church

In addition to the above observations let us summarize some of the findings related to the respective parts of the World Christian Community. If we take the church press in our country, which has been publishing regularly during the whole period, we can see in the global view an immense amount of reports and we can assume their large impact on the church constituency. In the Church Letters (Cirkevné listy) there were related to:

- The Lutheran World Federation. There were 87 articles often rather extensive in size and analytical in content published during the period concerned. Often the articles present the issues of the assemblies, issues of the Lutheran minority Churches, visits…

- The World Council of Churches is the second largest point of interest. 63 articles deal with the issues of its assemblies, tasks, personalities.
• The Conference of European Churches is covered with up to 30 articles.\(^{31}\)
• The Peace movement, CPC and World Peace Council is very often covered. The issues of the CPC will be often highlighted by the General Bishop’s reports to the General Convention in an extensive way.

Expressions of the Lutheran Worldwide Communion in Accompanying and Supporting the Church’s Mission (Lutheran World Federation, Martin Lutherbund, Gustaw Adolfwerk)

Importance of Pastoral Visits to Slovakia

In our publications and reports the importance of visits from abroad was often highlighted. In the time of isolation it was essential to break the boundaries and come to visit. The impact was not only in personal meetings, which were encouraging to the coworkers of the church. We have received feedback from our visitors to our own situation. Published reports about these visits are not rare in the church press giving an encouragement to the church. Let us quote from one of them.

General Secretary of the LWF Dr. Kurt Schmidt Clausen visited our Church on October 12 – 20, 1961. In the article “Valuable Guest among us” he shared some of his observations with about 2000 readers of Church Letters (Cirkevné listy).\(^{32}\) The goal of his visit was to inform our churches (he also visited the Silesian Church) about the work and tasks of mission of the LWF. He could experience “intense life and blessed work of our Churches. They deserve recognition and admiration since they worked in a Diaspora situation…also today they live from the Gospel and they do a valid ministry to today’s people.”\(^{33}\) It is interesting today to ask: why did the visitor go to the state run nursing home in Velky Biel and report about it in the interview? Obviously diaconia for the German Churches and for the understanding of the Lutheran Churches of mission is important. Our church did not at that time, however, have any institution of that kind. Everything had been taken over by the state. The visitor was shown a state run social care institution.\(^{34}\) The readers of that time could reflect on it…

Reports about visitors from abroad come often in general terms showing the large amount of the activity. The General Bishop in his report to the General Convention gives thanks for the Lutheran Pastors from USA, Slovak Zion Synod, spending a longer period in Slovakia, learning Slovak, visiting with the theological faculty. He mentions, that representatives of several churches from abroad visited our church in the year 1981, e.g. from Bavaria, Hessen-Nassau, Denmark and from the central offices of ecumenical life LWF, WCC and CEC.\(^{35}\)

The largest group of international visitors who visited during this period probably came on the occasion of the 70\(^{th}\) birthday of General Bishop Jan Michalko.\(^{36}\)

Support by Renewal and Construction of the Churches Infrastructures

Financial aid for reconstruction was sent to our church and widely appreciated. The reports about exact amounts have not been published and summarized together publicly.

Medical Help

\(^{31}\)Thanks to ThDr. Ivan Toth, we have a „Registration of the Church letters” (Registrácia Cirkevných listov 1887 – 1986) which exists as a manuscript in the Library of the EBF UK and allows an overview of the issues.
\(^{34}\)Cirkevné listy. 1961. p. 165.
\(^{36}\)Kýška, Miroslav. Úcta k životu zasvätenejmu cirkevi a ľudu. (The respect to the life consecrated to the Church and people) In Cirkevné listy. 1982. p. 183 – 185.
The Lutheran World Federation, Martin Luther Bund and Gustav Adolf Werk have supported members of our church with medicaments. New medication from the West was not accessible here. Transfer of those became regular and helped many. We also often brought them personally.

Peak Activities

I have chosen to present in this study two activities, the impact of which was immense and it may be exactly because of this fact, that they were not covered properly in the church press.

Consecration of the Largest Wooden Church in Paluďa

On August 22, 1982 the largest wooden Lutheran Church in Slovakia (built first after 1681, enlarged 1782), after it was moved to another location, was reconsecrated. Because of the construction of a huge hydroelectric power station in Liptovská Mara, this church could not any more remain in its historical location. As part of the state investment the church was taken apart, thoroughly renovated, all the artifacts were restored by experts, and reassembled in its new location. At the same time a new parsonage was built. All was covered by the state budget. It was a great victory of the church leaders that this valuable church did not end up in an open space museum. This had happened to a Roman Catholic Church building from the same region.

The consecration was carried out by General Bishop Ján Michalko. In his report to the General Convention he “expressed his conviction, that these festivities, even if they were not aimed to be a manifestation nor a demonstration of our faith, because they were not directed against anybody, but always the testimony about God’s love to us, they have contributed in many way to the fortification and stabilization of the faith of everybody who has participated there.” Bishop Michalko noted in his report also, that these festivities were always visited by one bishop only. In this case of such an important activity it must have been for my father, the bishop of the Eastern district, painful not to be there. (Whose will has been done there?...)

Among prominent guests we welcomed, were Dr. Josiah Kibira, the LWF President, and Th.Dr. Bela Harmati, coworker of the LWF Study department. The huge crowd of at least 7,000 people made a special atmosphere of an unforgettable highlight. The state authorities did not want to allow any use of an amplifier for the speeches. Thus many people could not hear the sermon and speeches especially outside of the church. The issue was negotiated with authorities till the last moment, and it was finally possible to use small microphones. The lady who was the president of the county’s national council, the official state authority, was present at the festivity personally. It was a real manifestation of faith and faithfulness to the church. The presence of LWF made a great impact. It is also interesting to note, that this event received almost no publicity in the church press. Three months after the event one of the speeches given at the meeting was published in the widely distributed Evangelical Messenger (over 20000 copies) with one photo of Dr. Kibira. No report about the program and the background was given. In the photo, one can see also one of the microphones, which became such a difficult issue for the state authorities.

Assembly in Budapest 1984

The 7th LWF Assembly in Budapest made a great impact on our region. It was a very important decision to come with this assembly to this part of the world. For me it was very important that it became also a meeting point of young adults from this region together with other Lutheran Youth. The Preassembly Youth Gathering was prepared by visits of LWF coworkers. We also received a visitor from Geneva. Finally a group of about 12 theologians and myself were part

---

of the delegation to the preassembly. I was asked to present on a panel my understanding of the Theme: Confessing Christ in the Socialist Context. It was chaired by Dr. Risto Lehtonen and the other two speakers dealt with this issue from the point of view of a capitalist and a Muslim setting. Youth representatives served in the Assembly as stewards.

General Bishop Michalko, head of the delegation, reported about the meeting in two long articles39 and in the General Convention.

One of the direct impacts was also the first youth gathering of our church after many years in Bratislava in 1985.40

**Literature for Theological Research**

This program of the Lutheran World Federation, Martin Luther Bund and the Gustaw Aolf Werk has been very important for our theological research. We have benefited from it. Books came to our libraries and also directly to faculty members. It should be noted with appreciation, that the theological library of Prof Jan Michalko has been donated by his family to our Faculty library.

**World Council of Churches’ Role**

From the published reports about the WCC assemblies and other activities, one can get the impression, that the WCC was used more as a space for active socio-political involvement in the worldwide setting by the representatives of our church. Rudolf Koštial, who became bishop of our Western District in 1969, complains in his article, that “a general characteristic of our ecumenical work is that we report about conferences of ecumenical nature”.41 The impact through specific visits and programs was less visible. Much more one could see especially socio-political attractiveness of the issues dealt with at the WCC level for our church leaders. Here a link to the interests of our church’s representatives for the peace engagement or even directly to the Christian Peace Conference of which our leaders of that time were active members, can be sensed. Our church has been a member in the Regional Czechoslovak CPC. The relationship between the 3rd Assembly of the WCC and the First General Peace Assembly of the CPC in Prague is reflected in the article “From Prague to New Delhi”.42

Reporting on the 3rd Assembly in New Delhi was rather extensive. Prof Karol Gabriš reported on Christian Ministry.43 Andrej Žiak, the General Inspector of our church, spoke equally about issues of the arms race, which should be stopped, development of the third world countries, which should be enhanced and human rights, which should be respected.44

A special though still rather typical case of the understanding of the role of the WCC, is seen in a message of 70 pastors to the WCC, objecting in 1950 to the resolution of the Central Committee of the WCC in Toronto through which the Central Committee supported western military efforts in the Korean conflict and opposed the Stockholm peace action.45 A protest against a new armament of Western Germany was signed by Protestant church leaders including deans Ján Michalko and Ján Hromadka in Prague and published in the church press.46

---

40 See more on page 7 and 8.
Conference of European Church’s Role

Our church has regularly participated in CEC activities, especially in its assemblies. Reports have been published and certainly brought to our members the vision of belonging to the European ecumenical setting.47

Bridges over the Iron Curtain – Responsibility of the Church Living under the Great Mission Commandment of Jesus Christ.

In conclusion I would like to sum up my findings as follows:

I understand the existence of the organizations, which gave visibility to the Christian World Communion as a gift of God to this world.

I appreciate the participation in these instruments of the World Christian Community during the Cold War as opportunities, which the Church of Jesus Christ has received to prove its authenticity.

These organizations became bridges of mutual communication. They have experienced in the Cold War period typical limitations. Still they allowed two-way traffic. Even if they were under close watch by different forces, these bridges were effective and useful for the purposes of the Kingdom of God brought to this world by Jesus Christ.

The impacts of these programs could be seen immediately. Many generated fruits in their respective time.

During and after the liberation from the totalitarian political systems and after the liberation from the animosity of the Cold War, many of those who walked on those bridges and built communion with others contributed to the construction of a new era through their experience of being part of the World Christian Community.

---