Report and Reflections: The Sixth All-Christian Peace Assembly and the Way There

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During the period from June 25 through July 9, 1985, I had the opportunity to take part in several meetings in the GDR (East Germany) and Czechoslovakia. I went in part on behalf of the United Church Board for World Ministries (UCBWM), and in part on behalf of Christians Associated for Relationships With Eastern Europe (CAREE). CAREE is affiliated with the National Council of Churches. During these two weeks I was in Potsdam, Leipzig, Torgau, and Prague.

POTSDAM

I arrived in Potsdam late in the day on June 26, and was met at the train station by Rev. Stephan Flade of the EKU (Evangelische Kirche der Union). He is a 34-year old pastor in the Babelsberg section of Potsdam. I was privileged to be his guest during my stay. Such opportunities to live in the homes of our counterparts in other countries is a highlight of travelling. The sense of participating in daily life adds a richness of human contact that is invaluable.

The Potsdam program had been devised by area churches who responded to an invitation to take part in commemorating the 40th anniversary of the Potsdam Agreement through planning a "peace program" focussed on the current situation of East/West tension. The underlying notion was to recall the spirit of cooperation in a
common cause (if only out of necessity) that had animated the Allied Powers – the US, USSR, France, and England – in formulating the outline for the administration of a devastated Europe after WW II. Hence, the organizers of this Potsdam meeting had invited representatives from churches in the four nations who had been allied in 1945. There was one guest from each of the four countries: from France, a Protestant pastor named Jean-Jacques Heitz; from England, Michael Rose – a retired diplomat formerly with the British Council of Churches; from the USSR, Fr. Davidov, a Russian Orthodox priest representing the Moscow Patriarchate and the European Exarchate; and myself from the US.

The program began with an informal luncheon on June 27. There we, who were guests of the Potsdam "Kirchenkreis" had the opportunity to meet one another, and key organizers of the meeting. A leading lay participant from Potsdam was Helmut Domke, a physicist. After lunch, we toured the Cecilienhof, where the actual meetings of the Allied Powers had taken place in 1945.

That evening we shared a light supper as guests of an area church, then took part in an ecumenical worship service at the Friedenskirche. Each of us who were guests were asked to bring three-minute greetings.

June 28, marked the beginning of the "meat" of the program. Throughout that day we met in a small group of about 12 persons, whose facilitator was Herr Domke. Our goal was to come up with some kind of joint statement. The interchange was interesting, though as is often the case when there is an official representative of a church (i.e. the Russian Orthodox), only a
relatively bland, "lowest common denominator" statement is apt to be produced. Since I was unable to take part in the continuation of deliberations on Saturday (due to my departure for Leipzig), I do not know the ultimate outcome of this process.

In the evening, a "presidium" was held, to which all interested members of area churches were invited. About 100 persons turned out for the two-hour program, which was moderated by an area pastor named Ulli Schultz. Each of us who were guests made brief presentations, after which the audience had the chance to question us.

Besides this formal schedule, there were opportunities for informal conversation with the Flades, the Schultzes, and others. For me, the most valuable part of the experience overall was seeing the GDR firsthand, and being able to ask fellow pastors what life was like for them. My general impression is that the GDR is economically prosperous in the Eastern European context. Its churchfolk seem to have what they call "Spielraum" (maneuvering room) vis-a-vis the government. They are forthright in discussing their restrictions and opportunities.

LEIPZIG/TORGAU

On June 29, I was driven to the train station near Berlin to meet a delegation of members of the Christian Peace Conference (CPC) and of CAREE (in the case of the Americans, since 1968, US participants in CPC activities have not been formal members of the organization). There were persons from the Netherlands, East Germany, West Germany, the Soviet Union, and the US. All of us were guests of the GDR Regional Committee of the CPC for a
preliminary seminar being held in Leipzig before the Sixth All-Christian Peace Assembly.

The time in Leipzig also provided significant interaction with "grass-roots" church people in a local church. Throughout East Germany there are 12 local congregations affiliated formally with the CPC's GDR Regional Committee. One of these, the Gnadenkirche (Grace Church), was our host in Leipzig. The Leipzig seminar began on Saturday with an afternoon session at the Gnadenkirche. Addresses were given by Alice Wimer of the US (chairperson of CAREE) and Dr. Gerhard Bassarak of the DDR, among others. That evening a large reception was held.

The theme of the Leipzig seminar was also oriented around East/West reconciliation. Sunday morning, June 30, the entire seminar group travelled to Torgau, the relatively small (20,000 population) town on the Elbe river where US and Soviet forces linked up in the final days of WW II. There a worship service was held in the Marienkirche (burial place of Martin Luther's wife, Katerine). Joachim Rogge, who just the night before had been elected bishop of the Gorlitz Landeskirche of the EKU, preached the sermon. Town officials from Torgau later received the delegation for a meal. Prior to that event our group which, again, included Soviet and US representatives, visited the monument which commemorated the 1945 Elbe link-up of Allied troops. Prayer was offered and flowers placed at the monument. We then went on to visit the gravesite of Joe Pawlowsky, the US citizen who had been among the troops at the Elbe link-up with Soviet forces, and who remembered the "Oath at the Elbe." In that oath, American and
Soviet soldiers swore friendship to one another. Before his death, Pawlowsky requested that he be interred in Torgau, as an effort to commemorate that wartime US-Soviet experience of exaltation in common service. His hope was that his gesture would be a step towards calling back to the public mind the fact that the US and the USSR had worked together, thereby helping create a mood in which such cooperation could again become more likely. At his graveside, prayers were offered, and the Soviet and US delegates embraced.

We then returned to Leipzig on our buses. That evening there was a "cookout" with folk and church music and grilled bratwurst with the congregation of the Gnadenkirche. It was an impressive congregation, with many young people, animated and at home in the church building. I was struck when a teenager felt comfortable enough in the church to take me up to view the centuries-old organ which had just been restored, and even to play a bit on it -- though he was not the organist himself. This is a church whose baptismal font was installed circa 1200 A.D.! The evening ended with an impromptu organ concert by the church's actual organist.

PRAGUE

Monday, July 1, our delegation travelled on to Prague, Czechoslovakia, by train. During the days to come, we would all be taking part in the VIth All-Christian Peace Assembly.

The Assembly began on the evening of the 2nd, with an opening worship service. All sessions of the Assembly were held in the Cultural Palace, a recently-built structure of enormous size. While the Assembly included over 600 delegates, visitors,
journalists, and "accompanying persons," we occupied barely one-quarter of this impressive facility. Midday and evening meals were also taken within the Cultural Palace. This meant that on most days we were there from about 9:00 A.M. through 10:00 P.M.

The regular program of the Assembly began on July 3. I had been asked to prepare the opening "Bible study" on the "choose life" theme taken from Deuteronomy 30:19. The twin themes of the ACPA were "God Calls: Choose Life! The Hour Is Late!" and "I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly." (John 10:10b) It seemed appropriate to extend the notion of Bible study in this context to become an actual worship service. Hence, it also included prayers and hymns - taken from a special hymn book prepared especially for the ACPA. (Copies of the text of the Bible study itself are available.)

The Assembly continued through July 8, all day each day. The largest proportion of time was spent in the plenary sessions. There we received greetings from prominent statesmen (I don't recall a single greeting from stateswomen, still too rare). Among their number were Gustav Husak, President of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. It was clear that for the state of Czechoslovakia, the Assembly was important. It received much coverage on television, and, I suspect, in print media there, too.

The plenary sessions were also working sessions. Resolutions and letters and appeals were prepared by a drafting committee throughout the week and, were then brought to the plenary for revision and action. Other materials, essentially reports, were produced by "working committees." There were four of these. Each
delegate was able to take part in only one, since they met simultaneously.

My own working committee was on the theme "Peaceful Coexistence and Liberation." I had chosen this one because one of my interests in the East/West reconciliation work that is my present vocation which has the potential for releasing funds presently spent on military budgets for development in the Third World (consistently called the "Two-Thirds World" at the Assembly). However, the working committee meetings proved more to be a forum for the expression of appeals from delegates who had particular concerns only loosely related to the theme. An impassioned plea from an articulate Palestinian scholar, for example, expressed his conviction that either there was "one too many people" in the Middle East, or "one too few states." His fervor and clarity were moving, even compelling, but that appeal and others analogous to it did not fit the format I had expected of substantive dialogue about practical steps that might be taken towards peaceful coexistence and about what its relationship with liberation might be. I should note that two papers were prepared in advance for the working session. This was true for the other three working sessions as well. In our own, Philip Oke concisely made the case for continued CPC support of the UN. In the second, a Latin American scholar discussed the militarization of Central America and its consequences for human development there. There was little "fit" between the papers and the deliberations.

Overall, I did not find the formal sessions particularly rewarding. There were moments of insight into the complexity of
the international situation. I particularly remember one vote in the plenary session in which the Soviet and US delegations found themselves voting in agreement against both East and West German delegations; I believe on a motion that essentially mitigated some condemnatory language directed at the US government.

Far more stimulating were the numerous conversations with the fascinating mix and diversity of delegates. Contacts made with Soviet churchmen over the past two years of "Bridges for Peace" involvement were renewed and/or deepened. (Among those Soviet persons I had met before were: Father Alexander Kravchenko, rector of the Odessa Theological Seminary of the Russian Orthodox Church; Sergei Gordeev, translator for the External Relations Department of the Moscow Patriarchate; Archbishop Pitirim, director of the publishing department of the Moscow Patriarchate; Ivan Bukatyi, supervisor in Minsk and Byelo-Russia for the AUCECB; Georgy Glushik, a newly-ordained Russian Orthodox priest; Alexei Bichkov, president of the AUCECB). Another opportunity that was most rewarding was the chance to meet local Czech pastors. With one of these gentlemen, I struck up a warm acquaintance. Local pastors were recruited for the Assembly to act as "go-fers", pass out papers, run mimeograph machines, etc. (Incidentally, each delegate, by my estimate, received roughly 200 sheets of printed material produced in the course of the week; with over 600 delegates in attendance, that equals about 120 reams of paper. All of this was generated by mimeo machine.

Sunday, July 7, I was able to preach in the Church of the Brethren where my friend Jan was pastor. He apologized for the
"small" turnout of about 115. It was holiday season, so the usual 200 attenders were about halved. He remarked that he preferred to preach to a full church, which, apparently, he usually had. The age mix was varied, running the gamut from children through the elderly. Many young people were present. A church school operated on Sundays during the school year, but was not in session in summer.

Jan and I had worked over a sermon I had brought with me, so that it was shortened to permit time for translation without running too long. He rendered into Czech my English. Two of the hymns we sang had tunes that I knew, as did an anthem sung by a visiting Bulgarian Protestant delegation. Jan and I also discovered that his Church of the Brethren (a minority denomination in Czechoslovakia, with about 5000 total members in the country; to be distinguished from the Church of the Czech Brethren, a much larger body) was founded in the 1860's by Congregational missionaries sent out by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. The American Board was a predecessor organization of the present UCBWM. I promised Jan that I would pursue an effort to establish some formal connection (which may, for all I know, already exist) between the UCC and the Church of the Brethren in Czechoslovakia.

It was after this service, in a conversation with a lay member of the church after all others had left, that I received an insight into the dilemma of our Christian brothers and sisters vis-a-vis the state in Czechoslovakia. This young man remarked that the official state news coverage of the Assembly troubled him, because
it was entirely focussed on "anti-Western" (NATO and US) aspects. If that was all there was to the Assembly, he said, it was not worth much. Because it was obvious, at least to him, that a portion of the blame must rest with the "East." As this conversation progressed, I saw that my friend Jan was becoming steadily more troubled by the young man's words. We had agreed that I would lunch with Jan and his wife, and he promptly whisked me upstairs to their apartment before we had time to pursue any further the theme the young man had raised. Here, I believe I witnessed in microcosm the painful resolution in one small incident of the tension between truth and pragmatism that repeatedly must confront faithful Christian persons in situations wherein a government restricts the scope and nature of public utterance. My heart went out to both the young man in his distress at one-sidedness, and to my colleague Jan in his distress at hearing about and feeling compelled to terminate a conversation about that one-sidedness.

This theme of "one-sidedness" deserves more comment. One of my own most significant learnings through the course of the Assembly was gained through conversation with a young Dutch woman named Marigke. She made clear to me that she, and many of her Christian friends and acquaintances active in the CPC - especially from East and West Germany, and Holland - have felt it necessary to make a faith-based choice between the Eastern and Western blocs: to support socialism and the East; to condemn "imperialist" practices of the West, and especially of the US government, which is seen as the mainstay of the Western alliance system. This is a
tactical choice, made in the belief that the situation of the world is so urgent - even desperate; and that in this context there is no time or opportunity to seek a "third way" independent of both blocs.

The practical consequence of this choice is that a microscope, as it were, is taken to the (many) flaws and evils of the Western bloc system; whereas a tendency to gloss over and explain away such flaws and evils in the Eastern system is apparent. In the course of the Assembly, this consequence was most starkly apparent in the respective tones of the letters sent to President Reagan and to General Secretary Gorbachev. (To be fair, it should be noted that as a courtesy, an American delegate was asked to draft the former, and a Soviet delegate the latter. Differences in "national rhetorical style" also account for part of the difference in tone.) The former was certainly polite, but it was much more pointed than the latter. It mentioned the Assembly's distress at US support of "terrorism" in Nicaragua. By contrast, the letter to the Soviet head of state, in its first draft, actually pinned the hopes of the world Christian community for a peaceful future on the success of the initiatives of the Soviet government!

For me, this outcome of the "tactical choice" noted above cannot be valid. I am sensitive to the urgency of the global situation, and I tend to feel that at the present moment there actually is more openness and flexibility being shown by the USSR than by the US on questions of military buildup and easing East/West tension. I find myself in agreement with certain proposals of the Soviet government which our own government has
cavalierly dismissed out of hand. But my agreement does not proceed from the fact that the Soviet government has made these proposals; rather, it issues from independent assessment of necessary next steps which then prove to agree with official Soviet positions. I do not, and cannot in good conscience, support without reservation a government of any sort. This for me is a clear and unambiguous consequence of Christian faith. The kingdom of God will not come through any secular human agency, nor probably will any close approximation of it.

It is, I believe, the work of the church to build that kingdom, perhaps on occasion in tactical cooperation with given initiatives of particular states, but never by giving blanket approval to one bloc or system, and blanket condemnation to another. The Christian church is one of the few organizations that has a visible presence through its own institutions that transcends all political and geographic "dividing walls." Animated by the invisible presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit, it can bind together the world's warring factions, possessed as they all are by the principalities and powers against which the apostle says we struggle. To give up that independence, or to fail to perpetually seek to extend it in situations wherein it is minimized by the state, is to inevitably become allies of some manifestation of the "principalities and powers" against which we struggle in one of their other incarnations. God knows that the church itself has a strong principality/power presence within itself as it is!

What the above-stated conviction means in practice requires much more thought than can be given in a brief report. But I would
like to see those of us in the broader CPC network who share the conviction that there must be for the church a "third way" ponder this and share our reflections with one another. The time may be short in reality. We do not know. But shortness of time, even if it were known for certain to be the case, cannot, in my judgment, release us from our obligation to be faithful. Thomas Merton, if memory serves correctly, noted some time ago that we are not so much called to be effective, as to be faithful. Outcomes remain beyond our competence to pre-determine.