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THE CHRISTIAN PEACE CONFERENCE IS FACING HARD TIMES

by William Yoder

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The Prague-based Christian Peace Conference narrowly escaped burial in the Fall 1991. Only 90 persons, some of whom had come to pay final respects, attended special sessions in Celakovice, Czechoslovakia, October 17-22, 1991. Thanks to funding from East European governments and the Russian Orthodox Church, the CPC had long hosted impressive assemblies in posh Prague hotels. In Celakovice though, the CPC convened in a students' dormitory now run by an American university.

The Christian Peace Conference was founded by the Czech theologian Józef Hromádka in 1958. At that time, the World Council of Churches was said to have a clearly pro-Western bias. Many East European churches were hoping to establish a positive witness *vis á vis* the communist governments, so an international platform on which to discuss these issues was created. In their view, Western church authorities were pushing for massive resistance and emigration as the only Christian responses to Communism. But the CPC's support of the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 proved costly. Hromádka was forced out, and the CPC never recovered completely from that blow.

Nevertheless, the CPC became a vital bridge for contacts between East and West. This organization also saw the struggle against the atomic threat and for global economic justice as major causes for its existence. Prague has regarded the WCC to be hampered by the undue caution of its member churches. Consequently, CPC-leadership prided itself in its ability to speak "an even more decisive word" on important world issues.

According to Rev. Lamar Gible from the Church of the Brethren headquarters in Elgin, Illinois, both of the CPC's historical roles are now in jeopardy. "The field is wide open for relationships with Eastern Europe," he states. "It is questionable in my mind why this organization still needs to exist. Other channels provide even better links." No East

European churches, with the possible exception of the Russian Orthodox, still remain CPC members. In Čelakovice, Canon Kenyon Wright of Scotland became the first Westerner to head the CPC.

The National Council of Church's affiliated organization "Christians Associated for Relations with Eastern Europe" (CAREE) broke off official ties with the CPC last November. CAREE president, Dr. Charles West of Princeton Theological Seminary, attributes this to the breakdown of CPC ties to Eastern Europe. CAREE's "primary focus must be on relationships with churches and their witness in Eastern Europe," he states. "We see the present CPC as an organization for justice and peace."

Rev. Gible also doubts the CPC's claim to be a more prophetic voice: "My own feeling is that the WCC and other societies have been as open and incisive as the CPC, indeed, even more so. In Čelakovice, I did not see much interest in radicalness or taking risks."

The once-proud CPC has become one small grass-roots movement among many, operating without the sanction or funding of official church bodies. Time will tell whether a burial in October would have been more appropriate.