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Presbyterianism Behind The Iron Curtain

Writing in the Presbyterian Record, Dr. J. Stanley Glen of Knox College gives impressions gathered at a meeting in Prague, Czechoslovakia, this summer where he attended a number of meetings of the executive of the World Presbyterian Alliance. Dr. Glen has appeared in the pulpit of the local Knox Church and his article is informative and timely.

Early in August the Central Executive of the World Presbyterian Alliance held its annual meeting in Prague, Czechoslovakia, as guests of the Evangelical Church. This was their first opportunity, due to relaxed restrictions in travel, of renewing contacts with the large proportion of people behind the Iron Curtain who belong to the Presbyterian family of churches.

If we have tended to associate Presbyterianism with Scotland and Ireland it may come as a surprise to learn that it reaches out into almost every part of the world with a substantial membership in lands as far separated as Holland, Brazil, and Korea. Its total world-wide membership is approximately forty million. In continental Europe almost forty percent live behind the Iron Curtain. The Reformed Church of Roumania, for example, has a membership of eight hundred thousand, while the Reformed Church of Hungary has a membership of one million two hundred thousand.

In citing these facts, it is well to remember that Protestantism had its beginning in Prague, a century before the time of Luther, Calvin and Knox, where the name of the early Protestant martyr John Huss still inspires the Czechoslovakian people. As an historic centre of Protestantism, Prague rivals Geneva and Edinburgh, even though for three centuries, and until after the first Great War, its protestant people had such a difficult time under catholic rulers influenced by the Jesuits.

It will be clearer, therefore, why the Executive of the Presbyterian Alliance met this summer in Prague. It was the first opportunity in many years of reassuring our churches behind the Iron Curtain of our continued fellowship with them in the Gospel. Considering the experience which they have had during and after the war and the severe test of their faith, it was most important to have had this contact with them. To have heard of the life and work of other churches from all parts of the world, from such countries as Britain, the United States, Brazil, Australia, Indonesia, was to them like an open window. The significance of such observation will be apparent when it is remembered that there is not only the iron curtain dividing eastern from western Europe but virtually an iron curtain surrounding each of the countries behind the larger curtain. It is as difficult for the average Czechoslovakian to get into Hungary or Russia as into western Europe. The same severe restrictions are imposed on communication. One is not long in Prague before one is conscious of not knowing what is going on in the rest of the world. It is not clear, of course, why tra-

vel restrictions have been relaxed. There was no difficulty entering and leaving the country and the utmost courtesy was shown. The mayor gave the members of the executive an official welcome in the city hall and the minister of education and culture gave a formal state reception which was rather elaborate.

Apart from what might be the propaganda value of such courtesy, there is some evidence of an inclination on the part of Czechoslovakian Communists to revise their opinions of the Christian faith. One example of this inclination has been the fact that the beautifully, historically accurate motion picture of the Life and Work of John Huss, which has been tremendously popular with Prague theatre-goers and which was shown privately to the members of the Alliance Executive, has stirred up fresh questions among the communists on the question "What is Christianity?"

On the other hand, it is difficult to say to what extent, if any, the churches have compromised with Communism. They have certainly had to adapt themselves to the new social conditions. Clergymen are paid their salaries by the state, and the work of all religious bodies is under the supervision of the Dept. of Education and Culture of the Communist Government. Under these circumstances the temptation to compromise and to remain silent when one should speak is likely considerable. But the effect has been to drive the Church and its ministry back to the Bible with the result that there is a strong emphasis on Biblical preaching even though there is little inclination to criticize the government. Since the latter would involve the risk of being sent to a labour Battalion under the army or being transferred to a remote village where one's influence would be greatly restricted, it is likely that most clergymen consider it wiser to sow the seed of the Word of God while they have the opportunity, and hope and pray that it will fall on good soil and eventually bring forth fruit. At any rate, there is no doubt that there is a living church in these various countries behind the Iron Curtain which resembles to a surprising extent the Church in the Acts of the Apostle.

Certainly, the freedom of the Church is restricted. In my opinion, visitors to Iron Curtain countries should learn to look beneath the surface before making public pronouncements here in Canada about the extent of such freedom. For, in addition to the conditions cited above, there are limitations on publications. For example, in Hungary no professor of theology is permitted to publish anything—not even a pamphlet or an article. The Evangelical Faculty in Prague which numbers twelve professors is limited to one book a year. Moreover, the number of students which may be admitted to the study of theology is limited by the government. Again, there are difficulties in youth work. The church has to compete with the various youth organizations which impose considerable demands upon the time and loyalty of young men and women.

There is generally an atmosphere of suspicion. One has to be careful what one says and the person to whom one says it. The cost of living is extremely high. A suit of clothes, for example, costs the average clergyman, office and factory worker a month's pay. If one is to eat, one must only spend a minimum on clothing, which accounts for the fact that most people in Prague are poorly dressed. A further result is that in most cases the mothers and members of families have to go to work to supplement the meagre income of the fathers. Such conditions, along with the experience of the German occupation, the war and the general upheaval following it, explain the lack of animation so noticeable in the faces of the people.

Prague is a beautiful city with its cathedrals, palaces, theatres, libraries, universities and government buildings. In old St. Vitus Cathedral, the tomb of the "good King Wenceslas" popularized by the Christmas carol, can still be seen. But the beauty of the city does not conceal its tragic history, evident from the white mountain battle memorial, the rose garden of Lidice and the Stalin monument. Nevertheless, the Czechoslovakian people have not forgotten their Christian heritage. For surprisingly enough the old Bethlehem chapel where John Huss used to preach centuries ago was recently rebuilt and restored by the government. A magnificent service marking its reopening was conducted by leading members of the Presbyterian Alliance in cooperation with the Czech Evangelical Church. The chapel was packed with worshippers. The preacher was Dr. John Mackay, of Princeton Theological Seminary, New Jersey, who delivered one of the simplest, most powerful and most uncompromising gospel sermons to which I have ever listened. Even though he knew that every word of his sermon was being recorded and that communist and government offic-

ials were in his audience, he presented the claims of Christ in the most direct and challenging manner. One cannot but hope and pray that the reopening of this historic chapel and the kind of sermon Dr. Mackay preached in it, is indicative of the future history of Czechoslovakia.

PARK BEAUTIFIED WITH PLANTING 200 SHRUBS

(continued from Page 1)

subdivision, there is a real possibility that someone will be injured.

Council decided to insert a notice in the Herald, reminding people that it is illegal to discharge firearms anywhere within town limits. The police have also been alerted to keep an eye on the district.

A further request by Sydney Newstead, who is building a new house on Mountainview Rd., that the sewer system be extended to take in his house, was turned down. Mr. Newstead offered to pay part of the cost, but council upheld their previous decision that, as the line could never be extended any further, the job is too expensive to service only one house.

First two readings were given to a by-law to provide \$3100 for a storm sewer on John St. from College to Victoria St.

Council has been advised by Dr. A. E. Berry, of the provincial health department that effluent from the sewage disposal plant will in future need to be chlorinated before it is dumped in the river.

A ratepayer had asked the possibility of extending the 7 o'clock closing for the municipal election poll, because so many residents work outside the municipality. Mayor Armstrong reported.

Councillors talked it over and decided that in all cases voters should be home by 6 p.m., and that if polling time is extended it keeps clerks and DRO's too late with their tally.

Council also discussed changing the place of nomination meeting from the library where acoustics are not perfect and accommodation is limited. No other public building would provide better facilities, they decided, and the library will again be used.

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Allan Brown, 19, son of Mr. and Mrs. James Brown, R. R. 1, Terra Cotta, won a new Dodge ruffled by Erin Lions Club.

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