

Week of Prayer for Christian unity 2005

Ecumenical situation in Slovakia

Slovakia is a new state populated by old national groups. The majority of the 5.3 million inhabitants of the Slovak Republic are Slovak (86%). Hungarians are the largest ethnic minority (11%), and are concentrated in the southern and eastern regions of Slovakia. Proportionately, Slovakia has the highest population of Roma in the region, estimated at around 500,000 people. Other ethnic groups include Czechs, Ruthenians (or "Rusins"), Germans, and Poles. Recent and sometimes unregistered immigration has been mainly from the poorer Eastern European countries, with significant Russian, Ukrainian, Serb and Bulgarian groups concentrated in the larger cities.

Christianity was first brought to the region in its Eastern form in the 9th century by the Slavic missionary activity of Saints Cyril and Methodius. From the 11th until the early 20th century, present-day Slovakia was under Hungarian rule, and became a predominantly Roman Catholic territory. The Slovak national revival was begun in the 19th century by intellectuals seeking to revive the Slovak language and culture.

The formation of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918 following World War I satisfied the common aspirations of Czechs and Slovaks for independence from the Habsburg Empire. On November 17, 1989, a series of public protests known as the "Velvet Revolution" began, and led to the downfall of communist rule in Czechoslovakia. In 1992, negotiations on the new federal constitution deadlocked over the issue of Slovak autonomy, and in the latter half of 1992, agreement was reached to peacefully divide Czechoslovakia into the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic (SR).

The socio-economic situation remains precarious, although generally better than Slovakia's eastern neighbours. Following important parliamentary elections in 2002 that saw the defeat of the nationalist parties, Slovakia has been accepted as a candidate for both NATO and European Union membership, both of which will have a significant influence on the country's future development.

The national unemployment rate is higher than 15%, and in some regions surpasses 30%. Thus the most endangered groups are long-term unemployed people. Roma people, single parent families, children and large families are other vulnerable categories at risk of poverty. The low level of social and health care has resulted in the fact that the Roma people's average life span is 15 years shorter than the rest of the Slovak population.

The organized forms of ecumenism in Slovakia had their origins in the environment of Protestant churches, and their purpose was to assert the interests of Protestants in relation to the majority Roman Catholic Church. In 1927, the Union of Evangelic Churches in Czechoslovakia (of which Slovakia was part from 1918 until 1993) was created. Within this union, the first contacts with the young world ecumenical movement started.

The representatives of particular churches had become increasingly aware of the movement that started to develop in Europe and in the entire world after World War II. They realized that the message of the gospel should unite the churches, not separate them. The Ecumenical Council of Churches in Czechoslovakia was established June 20, 1955. One of its purposes was to allow the churches to speak publicly about the social situation within the country after 1948, when communists took power in Czechoslovakia. This was a period of restraint in the life and service of the churches, as well as persecution of active church workers. In addition, co-operation with churches of neighbouring countries was needed. The task of the Ecumenical Council was to implement the ideas of the ecumenical movement in the territory of our country.

The year 1989 and the development of democracy provided a new impulse for the work of all churches; they could start the work of revival. As a result of change in general conditions, the mission and goals of the ecumenical movement in our country were transformed as well.

The Ecumenical Council of Churches in the Slovak Republic (ECCSR) resulted from the separation of Czechoslovakia into states, and begun its activity with its first meeting on April 15, 1993. The ECCSR associates churches that function in that territory. At the present, eleven churches are members, three of them as observers. The full members are the Evangelical Church of Augsburg Confession in Slovakia, the Reformed Christian Church in Slovakia, the Orthodox Church in Slovakia, the Brethren Church in the SR, the Evangelical Methodist Church Slovak District, the Czechoslovak Husite Church in Slovakia, the Baptist Union in the SR, and the Old Catholic Church in Slovakia. The observers are the Roman-Catholic and Greek-Catholic Churches, the Apostolic Church in Slovakia, and the Seventh-Day Adventist Church.

The ecumenical context is characterized by a disproportion of membership numbers between the respective churches. The following figures give an idea of the membership of different churches according to the results of the 2001 census: Roman Catholic 68,9% and Greek Catholic (Uniate) 4% - total of 72,9%; Lutheran 6,9%; Reformed 2,03%; Orthodox 0,93%; all other below 0,1%). There is some correlation between religious affiliation and ethnicity. The majority of Reformed Christians are ethnic Hungarians, and most Orthodox are ethnic Ruthenian or Ukrainian immigrants. The total population of Slovakia is 5,3 million. In this context the Ecumenical Council mainly serves as a body representing the "smaller churches". According to the 2001 census, the number of persons who claimed a religious affiliation in Slovakia increased from 72% in 1991 to 84% in 2002. The increase is partly due to the reluctance of some religious groups to declare their religious affiliation in 1991, and partly to the active missionary outreach of churches in Slovakia.

The relations between church and state in Slovakia are generally positive, and have been strengthened in the recent period. The Church Department of the Ministry of Culture oversees relations between church and state. The Church Department administers the state subsidies to the registered religious

communities. It has no authority to interfere with their internal activities. The ministry also administers a cultural fund that, among other works, maintains and repairs historical religious buildings. The Ecumenical Council, subsidized by the state, provides an important point of dialogue and representation with the authorities. Public opinion surveys systematically uphold the church as one of the most trustworthy institutions in the country. Recent elections have reinforced the presence of explicitly Christian parties and leaders in the government.

In 2000, the Slovak government signed an international treaty with the Vatican to regulate its relationship with the Roman Catholic Church. In April 2002, the government also signed a joint agreement with the eleven registered churches relating to the ECCSR, in an attempt to provide equal status with Roman Catholics. This national agreement is understood as guaranteeing the recognition, status and financial support of the churches and ECCSR. The support of the state for church schools is also strengthened.

However, there is continued uncertainty about the future financing of clergy and church personnel by the Slovak state, which poses the challenge of the economic viability of church structures and their activities.

In March 2003, the assembly of the ecumenical council of churches urged Slovak citizens to support European Union accession. According to the churches, EU enlargement is a challenge for the internal integration of people and churches in Slovakia, and requires churches to accept their common responsibility for the service of the gospel in today's world. The process of European integration should not be limited to the economic and political aspects imposed by the European Union. Churches think that there should be a list of their own objectives in the integration process, like increasing their openness to ecumenical cooperation, and finding ways of strengthening cooperation. At the same time, the spiritual identity of churches and the cultural integrity of Slovakia must be carefully nurtured and safeguarded to avoid dissolution in a new integration. Some of the churches are concerned about the growing penetration of sectarian teachings in the school system, and neo-liberal attitudes in Slovak society, which may undermine traditional moral values.

Since the year 2000 ECCSR operates an educational programme which aims at enabling its member churches in their service - mainly in areas of social work, youth work and work with marginalized groups. Staffed with one secretary, the programme offers capacity-building seminars and conferences to specialized workers in the churches. The programme also coordinates and accompanies the work of Youth - Women - and Diaconal commissions of the ECCSR. In 2002, the programme organized nine capacity-building seminars and one conference on the status of women in the light of New Testament.

Since 1999, the ECCSR operates a centre for study of new religiosity. This programme is operated in cooperation with the Ecumenical Society for Study of Sects. The Catholic Bishops' Conference also supports the programme. The main activity is the publication of a quarterly magazine, ROZMER

(*Dimension*). In 2002, four issues with 2500 copies of each were published. Another activity is the dissemination of information. Nine lectures on topics of new religiosity in different parts of the country were offered last year. The centre also operates a webpage. 12,000 hits were recorded last year. Eighty e-mail questions were processed. Another 100 personal visits were made to the centre. The centre is staffed with one programme secretary and one administrative assistant. The ECCSR is searching for support to strengthen this programme and open a fulltime consulting/counselling position.

Since February 2001, the ECCSR has prepared a weekly news programme with information from churches and ecumenical organizations worldwide. In cooperation with the Slovak state radio, a 10-minute programme is prepared, based on news from ecumenical agencies like ENI, EPD, LWI, KNA as well as interviews with international guests. A transcript of the programme is distributed via e-mail to a wide network of subscribers.

The Round Table programme is an important instrument which serves the churches in Slovakia in strengthening their service. Since 1996 the programme has supported a large number of projects carried by the member churches or through the ECCSR secretariat. In 2002 a total of 113 projects were supported with an amount of 210,000 euros, focusing on education, social diaconia, mission, media work and organizational development.

One of the main issues to be focused on in the future is the transformation and decentralization of the state owned and operated social care system. Churches are aware of the historical meaning of this challenge and are currently in the process of assessing their capacity to take over some of the institutions to be operated under their diaconal structures.

Another challenge to the churches' social work is the growing ability of Slovak economy to provide humanitarian aid. ECCSR is currently in the process of mapping the ground and conditions for establishing an independent aid organization.

There are many good examples of ecumenical activities at grass roots level among the churches in Slovakia. One to be mentioned is the Ecumenical Fellowship in the city of Kosice, which is the industrial and administrative centre of Eastern Slovakia.

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is observed by most churches in Slovakia. In many places Christians of different confessions meet during the Week of Prayer. Since 2003 the Christian youth movements in Slovakia also organize special ecumenical prayer meetings in January. A major event during the week is a central ecumenical worship which is attended by representatives of most churches participating in the ecumenical movement and also by representatives of civil and political life. The Slovak public TV broadcast the worship live on the nationwide channel.

Churches in Slovakia in these years pray mainly for wisdom and strength in the process of the transformation of society; for growth in unity which will

enable them to use the new positive opportunities as they enter the community of nations in the European Union; that they may serve as an enrichment for this community; and that they might find ways to effectively deal with negative social effects of the transformation.

(This description of the local ecumenical situation was prepared by the local preparatory group and is published under its sole authority.)