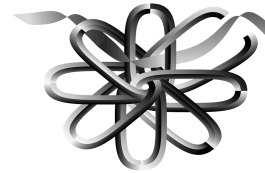


World Alliance of Reformed Churches  
Department of Partnership of Women and Men  
150 Route de Ferney  
1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland



**European Area Council and World Alliance of Reformed Churches  
Ordination of Women: Visit to Member Churches in the Czech Republic  
8-12 May 2002**

**Background**

The 17<sup>th</sup> General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, Princeton, 1954 established a commission "to formulate afresh the Reformed doctrine on ordination, and of the service in the church of minister, elder and deacon with particular reference to the ministry of women according to the Word of God and in light both of the ancient tradition of the church and the human situation today". The commission included in its report a special study of the place of women in the ministry of the church. While the report introduced this study by saying that the question of women in ministry cannot be examined based on the changing situation of women in the modern society, it noted that Jesus did not ignore the society in which he lived and as such the church cannot do so. The church must reflect the authority of Christ in its expression of right and just relationships between persons including between women and men. It sited that ordination of women is only one of the problems of the place of women in the church. At every level of church life there tends to be some misunderstanding about expectations and roles of men and women.

The "silence" texts, the Pauline text on headship of Christ over the church and that of husband over wife and the twelve exclusively male disciples were examined within the social context. The experience of some Reformed churches which have placed a high value on thorough theological study have found new insights as in the disunity of the human race. The significance of the attitude of Jesus to women necessitates full partnership of women and men in all areas of the life of the church. The social changes which have been achieved with the struggle of women have created a new awakening which brings a new sense of responsibility for women in public and church life. This is a gift from God who calls men and women to the ordained ministry of the church and speaks to the church in new ways. The church needs to open its doors to women and to create a space for them to also express their gifts. The Commission indicates the action of the Executive Committee 1954, "That the World Alliance of Reformed Churches go on record as favouring the admission of women to all orders of the Word and Sacrament of the church".

The European Area Council of WARC has placed the ordination of women in high priority. A visit was made to Poland on 16-22 April 1998 to discuss this subject and to open dialogue with the member church.

**Prague, 8-12 May 2002**

The team consisted of the following persons:

- Professor Henk Vroom
- Ms Evelyn Martin
- Rev. Patricia Sheerattan-Bisnauth, WARC
- Rev. Nadeje Mandysova, General Secretary of the Ecumenical Council of Churches (ECC) in the Czech Republic and local organizer of visit

The overall purpose of the visit was to have dialogue and discussion on the issue of women's ordination with the two member churches in the Czech Republic: Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren and Church of the Brethren. Specifically, one of the main objectives of the team visit was to encourage the Church of the Brethren which does not ordain women to revisit the subject and to open new dialogue on the ordination of women.

### **1. Visit to the Evangelical Theological Faculty of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren**

The group met with Prof. Th.Dr. Jakub S. Trojan, vice-dean for ecumenical contacts and other officials of the faculty. The Protestant Theological Faculty (originally known as the Hus Czechoslovak Protestant Theological Faculty) was founded in Prague on 28 April 1919. After the war the new Czechoslovak State was established and the Reformed and Lutheran Protestants united to form the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren. One of its first major actions was to establish a Faculty of Protestant Theology to train its theology students and those from other churches. In the first year of its existence the Faculty had 14 students, but this soon grew to 78 in 1923 and 160 in 1929. Women started studying at the Faculty in 1922; their number increased considerably after the Synod of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren decided to ordain women to the ministry in 1953. The Faculty was integrated into the Charles University in 1990. Currently, there are approximately 256 students, of which 227 are women. It was reported that about 60% of the graduates find jobs with churches and the others within the society. There is a total of 21 lecturers, of which 3 are female professors. Feminist Theology is offered as a course

### **2. Visit with the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren**

We met with Rev. Lydie Roskovcovà, synodal curator and Rev. Blahoslav Hájek, church minister and secretary of the synodal council. The Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren (ECCB) has a history which began since 1781 and has its roots in the Czech reformation of 1575. The ECCB joined the membership of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in 1875. The church has approximately 300,000 members in about 258 congregations with about 200 pastors, of whom about 36 are ordained female pastors. Women are not visible at the leadership of the synod. The majority of female pastors serves small congregations but does not participate at the higher levels of decision-making of the synod. It was said that there is no research available to examine the reason for this but cultural and sociological factors may contribute to this. Women are still the primary caregivers and have the major responsibility for families. Men do not share equal responsibility for family, and it was further said that it is acceptable for men to occupy the space in the public sphere and for women to stay with the parameters of the private or domestic sphere. The position of women and men in the life and ministry of the church is an extension of their traditional roles within their home and society.

The church needs to examine practical arrangements to encourage women in ministry and also to find new models of leadership within the church which reflect women's images and values.

### **3. Visit to the Church of the Brethren**

We met with Mgr. Pavel Cerny, president of the church and Rev. Karel Taschner, president of the theological faculty. The Church of the Brethren was established in the second half of the 19th century. The major area of concern to the church, as was expressed in the meeting, is the increasing secularization of the society in the post communist period. The church expressed a sense of call "to provide people with answers to the fundamental questions of human existence and to the new problems of our post-modern society (the drive for materialism, stress, overwork, fear of unemployment and other existential uncertainties)." Justice is not a primary issue but evangelism and how the church can have an impact on the nation.

The Church of the Brethren does not ordain women. This is a position of the church based on its theology. The church propounds the "headship" principle where man is the head of the woman as Christ is head of the church. Women cannot be considered for leadership of the church because they are in a secondary position and require the headship of the man. Biblical passages such as 1 Corinthians 11:3 and Genesis 1:26 were cited to support this argument. They said that women were satisfied with their present involvement in the church. There was also a strong argument about the social and cultural reasons where women have their role in the home as caregivers to their families and to take care of household responsibilities. They also referred to the communist era when women were "mandated" to work outside their homes. Now women feel free to revert to their traditional role that places them in the home and in the social service of the church. However, women do serve as elders but it was felt that they would not be interested in the ordained ministry because of practical reasons which involves family life. There is an increasing number of women in seminary especially in the area of pastoral care. They also have women missionaries.

However, both leaders, Rev. Pavel Cerny and Rev. Karel Taschner, said that they are open for dialogue on this subject.

#### **4. Dialogue with Church of the Brethren, Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, EAC and WARC**

The participants included Rev. Pavel Cerny and Rev. Karel Taschner of the Church of the Czech Brethren and Dr. Jana Opo\_enska and Professor Milan Opo\_ensk\_, former General Secretary of WARC and member of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, the visiting team and the host, Mrs. Nadeje Mandysova of the Ecumenical Council of Churches.

Professor Opo\_ensk\_ presented a historical perspective to the subject and shared the story about his mother who was the first woman to study at the theological faculty in 1922. She was then a catechist not seeking ordination but opening the door for other women to enter seminary. She worked alongside his father in the areas of Christian Education and Visitation. He told the story of his church and the ordination of women and about the process. A study was done and circulated to churches for discussion. In 1953 the matter was taken to synod and got the majority vote in favour of ordination. In that same year about 15 women were ordained.

The larger issue is Scriptural interpretation and how do we find a common ground. It was emphasized that partnership of women and men is a burning issue.

#### **Some Scriptural support used against ordination of women:**

**1 Corinthians 11:3:** *"...Christ is the head of every man, and a husband the head of his wife, and the head of Christ is God. (NIV)".*

**1 Corinthians 11:7-9:** *"For a man...is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman but woman for man. For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head."*

#### **Some Scriptural support for ordination of women:**

**John 1:12:** All people, men and women, have the opportunity to become children of God - presumably without regard to gender, race, sexual orientation, nationality, etc.

**Acts 2:1-21:** At the time of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was described as entering both men and women. In Verse 17, Peter recites a saying of the prophet Joel that talks about sons **and** daughters; Verse 18 talks about men **and** women.

**Romans 16:1:** Paul refers to Phoebe as a minister (diakonos) of the church at Cenchrea. Some translations say deaconess; others try to downgrade her position by mistranslating it as "servant" or "helper".

**Galatians 3:28:** *"There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."* (NIV) This is perhaps the most famous passage in the New Testament that assigns equal status to individuals of both genders (and all races, nationalities and slave status).

**1 Peter 4:10-11:** This passage discusses all believers serving others with whatever gifts the Holy Spirit has given them, *"faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms."* (NIV) Presumably this would mean that some women are given the gift of being an effective pastor, and should be permitted to exercise that gift.

### **5. Ecumenical Council of Churches: Women's Commission**

The team also had a meeting with the Women's Commission of the Ecumenical Council of Churches. The women spoke of their commitment to ecumenism and about the voluntary work they do with the church. One of their major projects is pastoral care for prisoners for which they were given public recognition. They expressed their concern for the increase in crime since 1989. They said that the younger generation is still trying to deal with the past and the transition is still in process. Women's issues are not usually discussed as the roles of women and men are mostly traditional. Women do not have many possibilities in being leaders in church nor society. When asked about family violence they said that the church has not addressed this issue and the society has also ignored the problem. They noted that the increase of social problems especially in violence and family disintegration needs urgent attention and that it should be put on the agenda of the church.

### **6. Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women.**

The team was invited to lead devotions and meet with women of the Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women who were gathered at the Ecumenical Council to plan for their General Assembly which will be held in Prague in August 2002. The theme of the Assembly is "Called to Compassion and Freedom - Christian Women Shaping the Future".

### **Conclusion**

On the final day, Sunday 12 May we worshipped at St. Kliment Church of the ECCB where Professor Milan Opo\_ensk\_ preached and Rev. Patricia Sheerattan-Bisnauth brought greetings on behalf of WARC. We are hopeful in the approach of the Church of the Czech Brethren which assured us that it is opened for further dialogue. We need to bridge the gap which exists between WARC and this member church. The church will share with us their vision for mission and WARC reiterated its commitment to rebuilding an enriching relationship with the Church of the Czech Brethren. We thanked our host and in particular Mrs. Nadeje Mandysova who made all local arrangements and accompanied us.