

The United Methodist Church in the Czech Republic has no reason to be afraid of the separation from the State

Church restitution and related issues have been discussed in the Czech Republic for a long time. Almost 23 years after the fall of communism the Parliament approved a state-church property settlement act. Superintendent Petr Procházka comments on the whole process of the passing of the bill on church restitution and on its significance for the United Methodist Church.

The church restitution bill was passed by the House of Deputies (Lower House) after a number of battles. What preceded its passing? How long did it take to prepare the bill?

Negotiations on the restitution of church property confiscated after 1948 started already in 1990, after the Velvet Revolution of 1989. The «enumerative law» of 1990/91 restored about 200 buildings to the church, especially monastic buildings. Thanks to this law, the UMC received back the chapel in Pilsen and the chateau in Horní Počernice in Prague. The law on complete restitution was already in preparation but it was finally not approved by the Federal Assembly. Other legal regulations also supposed the law on complete restitution, e.g. the Land Act blocking the transfer of the property originally owned by the church until the passage of the Restitution Act.

Who addressed restitution afterwards?

The question of church restitution was addressed by the left-wing government in 1998-2002. This government proposed the creation of a fund where the confiscated property would be transferred and its yields used for covering the churches' running costs. However, this solution was finally not adopted. In 2007-2009 the right-wing government prepared a bill returning only one third of property to the churches and compensating the remaining two thirds by an amount of money paid out over 60 years. However, this bill was not passed by the Parliament.

The restitution bill was only passed in November 2012. What does it contain?

The churches should be given back 56% of their former property, namely agricultural land, and the rest should be compensated by an amount of money paid out by the state over 30 years. In addition the state should progressively cease to finance the churches from its budget over 17 years.

Could you tell us about the negotiations between the churches and the state?

Though it may not appear so at first sight, the negotiations were quite complicated. They were conducted on several levels taking place almost at the same time. An agreement between individual churches associated in the Ecumenical Council of Churches, the Seventh Day Adventist Church, the Roman-Catholic Church and the Federation of Jewish Communities was necessary. An agreement also had to be reached between individual dioceses and congregations of the Roman-Catholic Church. After all these entities had come to an agreement, they started negotiating first with the representatives of the Ministry of Culture and then with the negotiators of the whole government.

How difficult was it to reach an agreement?

We must appreciate that an agreement between individual churches was reached and that churches were in perfect accord during the negotiations with the state. We must also mention the grand gesture of the Roman-Catholic church leaving 13% of its legal property to the other churches. Negotiations between the state and the churches as well as within Christian churches were difficult and intensive and compromise in many issues had to be pursued. I suppose that negotiations within the government coalition have also been very complicated and a number of compromises had to be made.

Will the United Methodist Church also be given back some immovable property?

Our church does not currently claim the restitution of any physical property. In fact, the communists had confiscated the chateau of Týnec near the town of Klatovy where an orphanage and retirement home were located. However, the Restitution Act does not apply to this facility. A part of a forest and land belonging to our holiday resort Poušť near the town of Bechyně will probably be the same case.

Will the United Methodist Church receive financial compensation?

Our church will receive financial compensation as other churches repressed by the totalitarian regime will also receive. However, our church will not receive a substantial amount of money. We perceive this compensation as a symbolic act of justice.

If the restitution is definitively approved, what will change in the United Methodist Church? Will any important changes take place?

We should observe that not only restitution but also the separation of the church from the state will take place. Over the next 17 years there will be an annual decrease in the contribution from the state towards pastors' salaries. State contributions currently represent 67% of pastors' salaries. The remaining 33% are made up by financial contributions from congregations and the church. We will pursue a complete separation in cooperation with the state. This means that the church's participation in pastors' salaries will be gradually increasing.

What will be the concrete implications for the members of the church?

Our church took the first steps towards separation already 10 years ago. Its percentage share in pastors' salaries has been gradually increasing ever since. The UMC will thus manage the separation and most probably no earthquake will take place. Our congregations are able to gradually increase their share in pastors' salaries. Financial compensation from the state will help to create a reserve fund used for financing the remaining share of the salaries of pastors in smaller congregations and pastors with special assignments. We therefore do not have to be afraid of the separation from the state.

How will the financial compensation be used? Is there any plan?

Last year we worked intensively on a document called UMC Strategy (2013-2030) and subtitled Strategy for solving financial matters connected with change in State support. This document was prepared by pastors, lay people, the bishop and his Cabinet. It underwent at least ten rounds of observations and revisions. It presupposes that financial resources from the financial compensation will be invested and only the profit from this investment will be used for the creation of the above-mentioned reserve fund, for the support for diaconal work, for the support for missionary work in and outside the Czech Republic and for the support for other church ministries.

The Czech atheistic society does not trust churches. People often think that churches are useless organizations sponging on the state. Why is the churches' image so bad?

I believe that this enviousness has several reasons. The church is not perceived as a fellowship of people believing in Christ but rather as a instrument of a religious society aiming at power, money and influence. It had often been the case, so why should the church suddenly become different? The totalitarian regime had a huge influence on people's minds. It gradually managed to force the church out to the edge of society. Faith was no more part of daily life but something «strange». After the Velvet Revolution of 1989 a very short period followed when the church enjoyed some credit in society. However, it was not due to our ideas, lifestyle or faith. The church was perceived as an island, a fellowship of those who had revolted against the communist regime. This was the reason that this mostly collaborating society was proud of the church. However, it was clear that this social position of the church would not last long.

The act on church restitution was passed despite the opposition of left-wing political parties and most citizens. Will it not damage the image of the church even more?

One day history will appreciate the right-wing government of Petr Nečas courageous enough to enforce the law on property settlement with churches and religious societies despite the resistance of the opposition and society. I believe that one day this will even be considered the most important act of Petr Nečas' government. The property and financial compensation as such will not damage the church. Only bad management can damage it. We must expect that the media will follow very closely how churches administer its returned property and where they invest their money. Flocks of vultures are gathering around the churches, many are waiting for their opportunity in the church. There will definitely be cases of abuse, abstraction, etc. But it is important that these will only be isolated cases.

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