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Chapter 13

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Church Revitalization after the Velvet Revolution in the Czech Republic

PETR CINCALA

Research into the post-Communist Czech worldview reveals that organized religion and the church are perceived with real aversion. In today's Czech reality of two separate worlds, public and private, unchurched people see the manipulation and control of the public sphere as also permeating organized religion. This study will show that a movement of "cell" or "house" churches which are missional, organic, and transformational can better reach people in Czech.

When communism collapsed in the Czech Republic in 1989, people were filled with a great relief and optimistic excitement. This event is still remembered as the Velvet Revolution. Banners with signs stating, "Love will win over hatred and truth over deceit," hung in the streets. Hopes were high and people were receptive to change.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church had great ambitions. In the next few years that followed the political changes, large groups of people were attending evangelistic meetings, and churches saw an increase in baptisms (see Fig. 1). Believers praised God and were convinced that the promised latter-day rain was finishing God's work through the social and political emancipation.

**SDA Church in Czech Republic
Baptisms (1990-1994)**

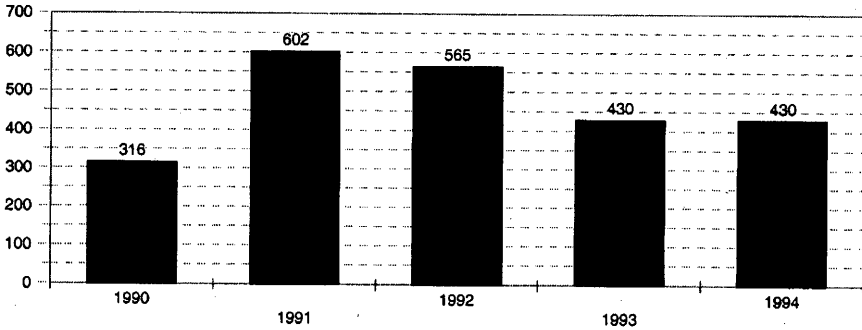


Fig. 1: Adventist Baptisms in the Czech Republic in 1990-1994

But those days are gone. Despite the newfound freedom and possibilities, people are drifting away from the churches more than ever before. Among the church leaders there is a growing realization that people are not interested in the church. Although in the few years following the Velvet Revolution hundreds of people were baptized, now the church is sidelined and not growing any longer. During the last five years the Adventist Church membership has declined, and worship attendance has dwindled (see Fig. 2).

**SDA Church in Czech Republic
Annual Growth Rate (1983-2002)**

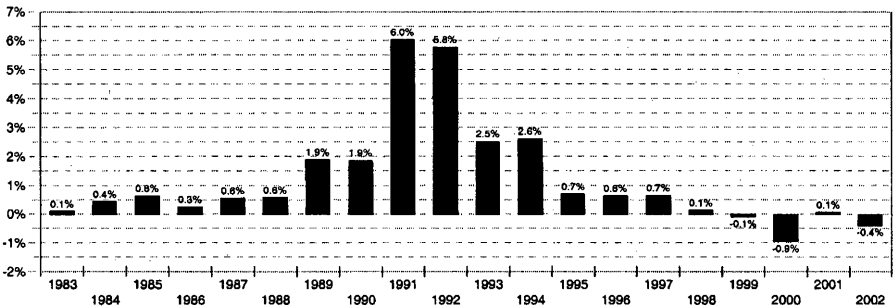


Fig. 2: SDA Annual Growth Rate in the Czech Republic in 1983-2002

Over the next ten years, since the collapse of communism, major Christian churches have lost 30-50 percent of their members (see Table 1; Czech Statistical Office 2001a). This obviously has had a negative influence on the dynamics of the church.

Table 1: Census Report of Church Affiliation (Czech Republic)

Census	Roman Catholic	Evangelicals	Hussites	Other
03/03/1991	4,021,400	204,000	178,000	120,300
03/01/2001	2,709,900	137,100	96,400	314,500

Source: Czech Statistical Office (<http://www.czso.cz/cz/sldb/index.htm>)

The 2001 census illustrates this decline of religious interest. The “no faith” group grew nearly 20 percent over ten years, while the number of those claiming to be believers decreased by 12 percent (see Fig. 3).

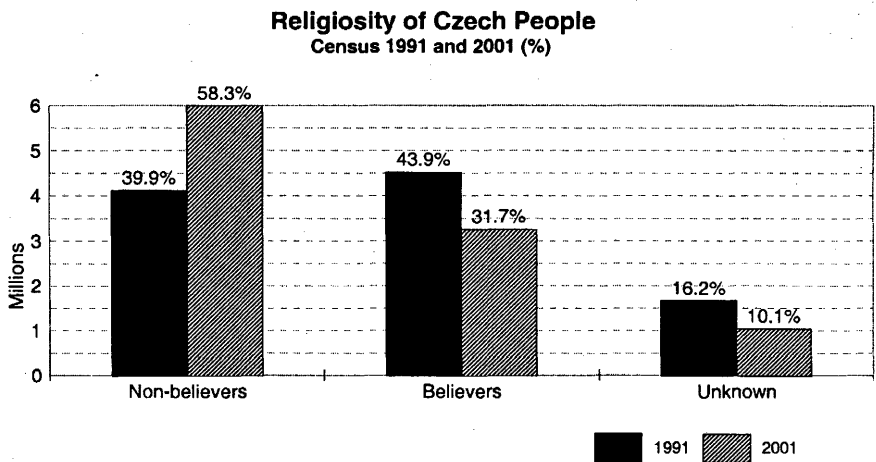


Fig. 3: Comparison of Religiosity in Czech Republic

These statistics raise a number of questions: Does the church have a place in the heart of the Czech people? Is the society indeed as atheistic as the polls convey? Is there any hope to reach the Czech people with the gospel?

The Dilemma of Czech Religiosity

To answer these questions, a study was designed to gain a deeper understanding of both the societal and the church contexts (see Fig. 4). Followed by a literature review, an ethnographic and church assessment was researched in several ways. A three-level content analysis of front-page articles from a major Czech newspaper was conducted between August 1998 and October 1999. (The first-level analysis tried to identify groups of frequently used words, especially religious terms. The second-level analysis evaluated any significant correlations between specific themes. Finally, the third-level analysis focused on an in-depth analysis of selected articles to identify patterns, sequences, and processes of Czech religiosity.)

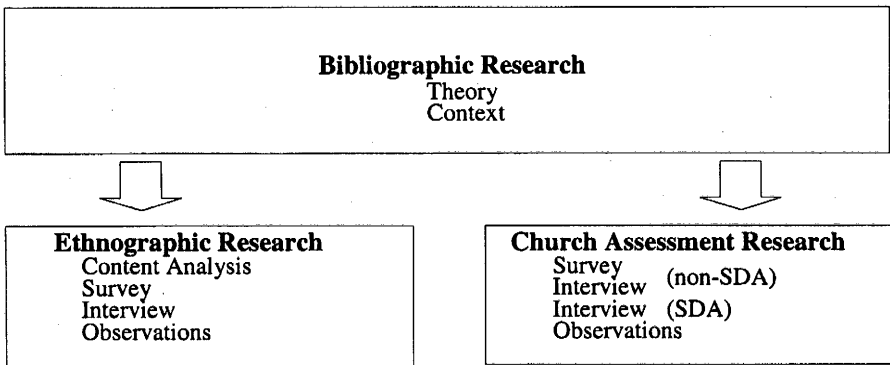


Fig. 4: Research Methodology for Understanding the Societal and Church Contexts in the Czech Republic

A number of surveys were conducted to measure the religious status of secular people (adopted from Schwarz's Natural Church Development project; Schwarz, 1996) and to assess the health and growth of churches from various denominations. Finally, both churched and unchurched people were inter-

viewed to gain deeper insights into their understanding of life and their attitudes toward religion.

The Nature of Czech Religiosity

Through these interviews and surveying of unchurched people, I found, to my own surprise, that the Czech people are not as irreligious as presented in official polls of the 2001 census (Czech Statistical Office, 2001b; see Figure 3). On the surface, about 60 percent of people present themselves as having no confession (no faith). But my survey on religiosity indicated that 99 percent of all Czechs seem to believe in something and are not opposed to faith.

The survey asked for responses to a variety of statements describing various aspects of religiosity (such as “The idea of God is an outworn concept” or “God is only a symbol of man’s ideals”). Two clusters of questions pointed to two religious indicators (“I believe in God” and “I need God”). Figure 5 shows the spectrum of religiosity in the Czech society.

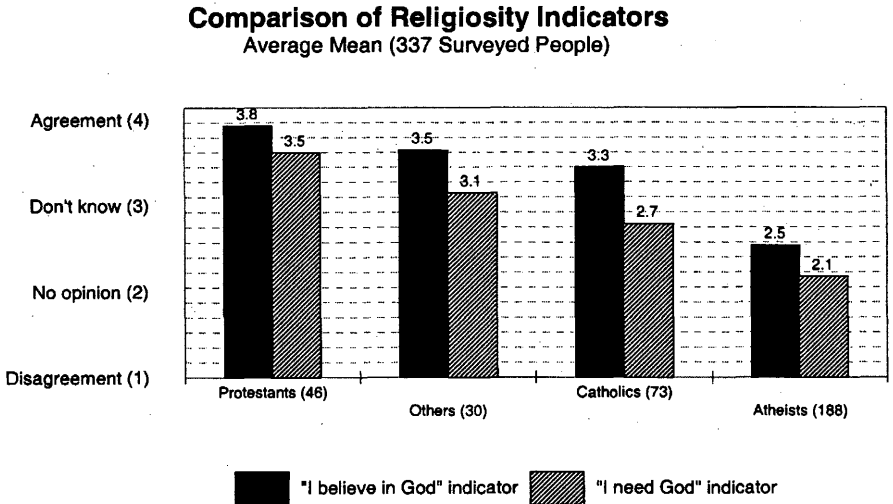


Fig. 5: Religious Indicators from Survey of Secular People

The real dilemma is not that people are not interested in spiritual matters but that they have a deep aversion toward organized religion and the church

in particular. Even the Czech atheists are spiritually open and often develop latent forms of religiosity. People are spiritually hungry, but they do not want to have anything to do with an organized church. Czech atheists in the survey made statements like the following: “People doubt church, not Christianity,” or “For the majority of atheists, God is not an alien notion, only the way faith in Him is presented by the present conception of religion.”

These and similar stereotypical views as found among the surveyed people do not necessarily explain every person’s worldview, yet these comments reflect a common perspective. The attitude of people may have been impacted by their historical-national consciousness. Czech history provides some explanation for these current attitudes and worldviews. Two patterns of the Czech worldview described below are relevant to our research.¹

Hussite-like Mentality

The spirit of John Hus and his associates, who dared to pinpoint the errors of the church, is still with the Czech people. Czechs are very critical toward any organized church. However, unlike Hus, they go even one step further by staying away from and being skeptical of organized religion. Through conversation with Czechs, one can sense that their faith is marked by a deep reservation. They distance themselves from the church with statements like these: “I have nothing against the church, but I do not want to have anything in common with it” or “I will come to church when I get older or when I get sick.”

The fact that throughout most of their history the Czechs were under some form of foreign domination causes them to be often in opposition to these occupying forces, which in turn caused them to suffer from an ongoing identity crisis. People know more about what they do not want to be than about what they are or could be. On the surface, people hesitate to be associated with publicly organized groups (political, religious, etc.). Although they naturally desire to belong, they have doubts and voice distrust about belonging to organized institutions. Even after fourteen years of life in a free society, such inner uneasiness can still be found. The Czechs are very proud, and yet they appear to lack self-worth. As a result, various defense mechanisms are in place within their social as well as institutional interactions.

Czechs are critical and intolerant of others. Although naturally friendly and sensitive, they often “armor” themselves as rough and suspicious. It is common for Czechs in the public sphere to be two-faced. The question, “What

will other people say?" often drives many of their everyday decisions. It is apparent that these defense mechanisms assist them in protecting themselves subconsciously from getting hurt.

Dualistic View of World

The world in which Czechs live is in many aspects divided into two realms—public and private. People behave differently in public than at home. Double-talk, double-face, and double-thinking are common. It is impossible to truly know a Czech person in the public sphere. The private sphere is protected because that is where people treasure their dearest values—happiness, love, friendship, and relationships. The public arena, on the other hand, is like a jungle where people hide to catch their prey. The public is governed by an apparent lack of concern for others. The primary value of work is not so much in making a difference in the world as in satisfying one's own material needs.

In the Czech mind-set, the church clearly belongs to the public domain. The value of going to church, therefore, is measured by the same criteria as any other public institution. People make their decisions based on what benefits (mostly of a material nature) they might obtain from going to church. The result is obvious. In the public perception, going to church carries with it significant losses and vulnerabilities with minimal gains.

A church is seen as an institution that asks for money, volunteer work, and other personal sacrifices. A church is not seen as an agency that inherently serves and gives to people. The church is often associated with loss of freedom, loss of happiness, loss of friends, loss of self, loss of comfort, and perhaps even loss of peace. People's reserve toward the church is nurtured by various fears. What if joining a religious group would make them extremists? What if going to church would make them look as if they are not normal? They appear concerned that they would be manipulated into believing and be controlled by church authorities. In summary, people are afraid that church would invade and spoil their most valuable domain—their private (and safe) world.

The Quest for Plausible Churching

Repeatedly in its history, the country was violently overtaken and the public was oppressed by hostile and aggressive political powers, most recently a communist dictatorship. Interestingly, the communists were not satisfied with controlling the public sphere; they tried to gain access to people's private

worlds as well. Yet, through this tyranny, the walls protecting the private part of people's lives grew thicker.

The password into the private sphere of those who have been threatened is credibility and trust. Although the church gained a favorable position during the Velvet Revolution, it soon lost much of its credibility through unfortunate events (claiming back its property, striving for political power) and has now been categorized as one of the public institutions.

As a public institution, the church lacks essential relational elements by default. The church has a lot of explaining to do, such as the burning of John Hus, the events surrounding the counter Reformation, the church's part of foreign occupation and wars, and the church's striving for power and control. Winning confidence back takes a lot of time and energy, and requiring painful changes. The bias against the church is too deep. For an increasing number of the unchurched, the church today does not count.

Hence the dilemma, for by its very nature religion includes the private and relational spheres of life. Czechs replace socio-spiritual activities, church, and institutionalized religion with the pub, nature, sports, and horoscopes. There is also a growing group of spiritually hungry people who search for plausible forms of religion and often are attracted to nontraditional spiritual movements (cults, sects, or secret religious circles). Such groups attract Czechs today who are looking for fellowship to satisfy their felt needs, regardless of whether or not it is biblically grounded.

Response of the Church

Traditionally churching people still remain in the Czech society. The country has a rich church history of which these traditionalists are proud. However, any overreliance on the past can lead not only to a tendency to defend one's traditions, but also to a lack of necessary adaptation and flexibility to keep the church alive and attractive.

Some of the neo-apostolic churches that have broken away from the traditional churches have seen some success in reaching the socio-spiritual needs of Czech people. However, most organized churches have experienced difficulties in building meaningful bridges to unchurched people.

Most of the churching people in the Czech Republic hold on to a rather passive view of mission—"come and join us." However, when unchurched come to church, they often face a lack of acceptance and a pressure to conform. In the

eyes of unchurched people, the values of the public sphere—uniformity, manipulation, and control—also have permeated organized religion. Unchurched people are looking for how one's faith in God connects with and applies to daily life. They are looking for a religion that is practical and relevant and addresses their felt needs.

Unfortunately, there remains a wide and challenging gap between the society and the church. Although people know there is an ultimate power (God), they are spiritually wounded and have closed their hearts against the church. Their emotions resist God, but deep down they continue to experience a spiritual void.

Church Revitalization

In view of the societal analysis and church assessment, the question has to be raised: What are the role and purpose of the church? What does it take to meet the spiritual needs of unchurched people? How far can the church go to fulfill its mission?

Missionary Role of the Church

Almost nobody would question the role of mission. Mission has always been considered as a primary purpose of the church and is based on the biblical mandate in Matthew 28:19-20, yet the traditional model of mission does not seem to fit into today's environment. Spiritually hungry people should go to church and listen, but they refuse to do so. They should seek the truth, yet they do not. The Bible can provide many answers to the questions people are asking today, but the churches are ill-equipped to do so. It seems their words have lost their power.

Is it possible that the content of mission is more than mere words? The mission of God needs to be presented in a way that people can understand. If salvation comes with the knowledge of and relationship with God (John 17:3), mission also needs to help people to experience who God is and how God's love tastes.

In the study of Scripture we can see that mission comes from God's heart (character) and that God was the first missionary (Bosch 1992:389-93). The meaning of the word "mission" in the original Latin is "send" and "one (who is) sent" (Dybdahl, 1998:8-14). The church was sent to the world by God. Thus, the "church exists by mission as a fire does by burning" (Burnett 1996:12). The

church exists because of mission. The church in its nature is a mission center. The center of God's attention is not so much the church, but the lost world. The church exists through God's dealing with the world. What can the church offer to the unchurched people? How does God want us to do His mission in the Czech Republic?

Missionary Point of Reference

We might find an answer to the church's dilemma today by looking at the ministry of Jesus. He came to a society in which a line clearly separated the religious and the holy from the sinners and the worldly. It was very hard to cross that line. The religious leaders worked very hard to win just one person (Matthew 23:15). But when Jesus came and crowds followed Him, the religious people were puzzled. We know that Jesus did not change Scripture. But Jesus put "new wine into new wine skins" (Luke 5:37, 38).

This brings me back to the gospel. Adventist Christians all over the world are united by their biblical teachings. New missionary endeavors should not change the message nor bring a new theology. On the contrary, the purpose is to fulfill the Adventist mission and vision of sharing Christ's love. Christianity is not only a summary of beliefs and doctrines but also a system of dynamic and meaningful relationships. It seems, though, that new societal contexts need new theological frameworks.

Basics of Christianity

Based on the societal analysis of the Czech context, such a theological framework must rest on five biblical principles:

1. *Knowing and worshipping the true God.* "For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved" (John 3:17). Before the final judgment comes, God strives to save every person (Revelation 14:6; 2 Peter 3:9). He wants to take everyone back and does all He can to do so. His unconditional acceptance means all people should have an opportunity.

Most of the Czech people know somewhere deep in their hearts that God exists, but they are emotionally blocked against Him. If there is a God, why would He allow so much suffering, wars, and injustice? Czechs are spiritually hurt and wounded, but they are relationally hungry. When the picture of God

as a loving heavenly Father who longs for His lost children gets through to them, their attitude will be changed.

2. *Growing Christians.* It is important to realize that Christians are not better than others. Christians are as prone to failures as anybody else. To become a Christian, we accept God's gift by faith and become part of His family in spite of our failures. However, Christians are characterized by personal growth. God transforms those who become His disciples. It is His work, which requires our participation, that will make us new. The goal of Christians is clear. They want to be more like Jesus (Ephesians 4:12). For some people such a way does not seem to be easy because it requires giving the lead to Jesus, who "hath begun a good work" in us and who "will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Phillipians 1:7).

3. *Fellowship of believers.* Being a secret Christian (Christian loner) does not bear much fruit. It is like trying to be a husband without having a wife. However, Christian fellowship does not occur only in church buildings. Christians can meet in different settings, such as homes. As a matter of fact, Christianity begins in a private sphere.

God is willing to meet people in the fellowship of small groups (Matthew 18:20). The first Christians understood this well (Acts 2:42-47). Whatever the setting, the uniting elements of God's Spirit of love have to be present (Galatians 5:22-23). There is no better place than among His family that we can experience the life-changing power of God. We are not talking here about a common human relationship but about a relationship nurtured by God's motivating power.

4. *Service.* In the post-Communist society there is a special hunger for recognition. Many people want to be helpful rather than to be helped, useful rather than to be used. Unchurched friends often express their friendship by asking: "Can I help you with something?" This is an important element of Christianity. Through our service to others God can do His work of transformation in us. For that reason He wants to equip us for exceptional service through His spiritual gifts.

Although Christians cannot earn salvation on their own, that does not mean that they have to stay passive. On the contrary, our ministries are a demonstration of God's love in our own lives. Gift-oriented ministries connect heaven with earth in a tangible way through which people can experience God in their lives as well (Ephesians 4:11-14; 1 Corinthians 12:7, 11, 12, 27). The

activities of the church are devices that will create a desire in people to get to know God better and to become part of His community.

5. *Mission.* This point brings us back to where we started. Mission is the climax of God's purpose for humans (Warren 2002). God commissioned Noah, called Abraham, brought Israel out of Egypt, sent His Son, and founded the church because He is a "missionary God." David Bosch sums it up clearly: "There is church because there is mission, not vice-versa. To participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God's love toward people, since God is a fountain of sending love" (Bosch 1992:390; cf. Aagaard 1973).

Mission has to have motivation other than mere duty, command, or authority. People are very sensitive, not wanting to be manipulated or pressured. Usually people are motivated to share with others only if they have something others could benefit from. "What do I get from this?" asks a typical person. "What can I offer my unchurched friend that he could benefit from?" is a question each Christian should ask.

Opportunities for Revitalizing the Church in the Czech Republic

The Czechs have a distorted knowledge about Christianity and God. Thus it is very difficult to reach them by traditional means. They are more likely to be reached in the invisible (private) sphere.

Traditionally, churches are characterized by church buildings. However, in our present-day Czech context, spiritual buildings established through living stones are needed (Ephesians 2:20-21; 1 Peter 2:5). God is the Builder and people are the building stones. God is not limited to the church buildings. God may work in the unseen, private sphere. A stable building needs to be built on a solid foundation that is often hidden under the surface. Churches need to be built that same way.

If the church is a living organism, it should, as every living organism, consist of cells. Such cells may be small groups meeting in living rooms. The organism of the church then grows and strengthens by cell multiplication. Dynamic small groups may help to bridge the gap between the church and society in the Czech context.

The structure of a living organism has its order, but it is in constant motion. It changes and adjusts to the new conditions of growth. Revitalized churches that are comprised of house communities help people to experience Christianity in all five areas mentioned previously. As a human body consists of various organs, cells may vary. Every cell has its unique mission and specific missionary purpose. Living-room cells may help those who tend to hide and privatize

their spiritual search. With a growing number of cells, an opportunity to worship and praise God together becomes natural.

There are many people living in my country who believe, but have their reservations. They do not identify with an institutional form of faith. They seek in secret because they fear ostracism and hurt. Rationally they know there is something (somebody) above; however, their religious feelings are blocked by their personal fears. God's arms are open for them. God is waiting to be accepted. God desires to answer their questions, and God wants to share His love with them in meaningful ways.

Although these people are searching, they cannot by themselves often find God. These people are ready to be touched through a passionately praying team who cares about them. They often seem willing to be embraced in a safe, intimate environment of a cozy living room where they can meet a circle of people reflecting Christ. They are willing and open to experiencing God's presence in the fellowship of believers, where everybody is excited to serve, and where people breathe and live for saving those lost and desperate.

Notes

¹ The findings are summarized in the sixth chapter of my dissertation (see Cincala 2002:239-48).

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