

10-1-2020

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Recommended Citation

Činčala, P. (2020). A Missional Outreach Model in the Czech Republic, a Postchristian, Secular Culture. *Great Commission Research Journal*, 12(1), 55-65. Retrieved from <https://digitalarchives.apu.edu/gcrj/vol12/iss1/4>

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A MISSIONAL OUTREACH MODEL IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC, A POST- CHRISTIAN, SECULAR CULTURE

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Abstract

The Czech Republic is one of the most secular countries in the world. Moreover, the church has not been growing over the last few decades. This case study presents the church planting efforts in the city of Liberec, focusing on an outreach center started by a small number of Christians with the goal of sharing Christ's love in culturally relevant ways. The initial efforts led to a family-centered activity center with many programs that helped develop personal relationships, trust, and open doors to share the gospel. An English class and gospel choir have been at the center of the outreach, but many other activities have been initiated according to the various needs that the leaders saw. This culturally sensitive approach to sharing Christ's love has led to the formation of a small church.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the communist Czechoslovakian government permitted Christians to meet, pray, and worship together. However, this "freedom" was merely a cover, designed to show the

Western world how “open” the country was. The reality was, however, that while Christians had the theoretical ability to meet and pray together, they could only do so in fear, as spies were often among those who would come to such meetings, and their presence could have grave consequences for anyone seen as a threat to the government.

How is it that this was the spiritual climate in the country where the Reformation started and where a strong Protestant presence continued for centuries...the country of the Hussites, the Brethren, the Moravians, and the Anabaptists? Despite this rich history, the process of de-Christianization began as early as the 17th century, when various Reformation efforts were defeated by force. More than three centuries later, the Communists were well aware of the advanced secularization within Czechoslovakia; they took full advantage of it, waiting to victoriously celebrate the burial of the Church.

The Christian church experienced a rebirth after the Velvet Revolution in 1989 when the Communist regime collapsed. Crowds began attending evangelistic meetings, and numerous baptisms were celebrated. However, those days quickly passed, and within half a decade, Christian passion had quieted once again. Despite the new freedom and possibilities that the Velvet Revolution had brought, people gradually drifted away from the churches in greater numbers than ever before. At the turn of the century, mainstream churches lost 30% to 50% of their adherents (Figure 1).

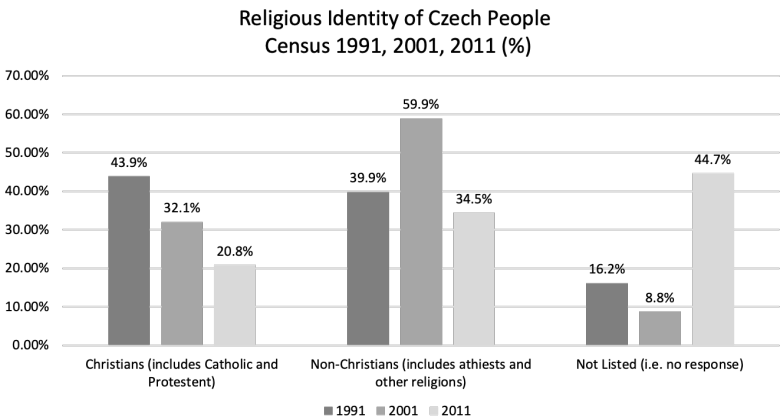


Figure 1. *Changes in Religious Identity in the Czech Republic, 1991-2011* (Český statistický úřad [Czech Statistical Office], 2014, p. 5).

This period brought to light the harsh reality of how irrelevant Christianity and the church had become to Czech culture. Yet, it also provided an opportunity for the church to rethink its role and mission. Because of this, I chose to complete my PhD (from Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan) focusing on a proposed strategy for mission work. Once approved, this proposal was followed by mission work in the field, testing various ways to expand God's Kingdom in this secular, resistant environment. While the below model had a vague structure before implementation, much of its precision developed in response to people's needs as the work progressed.

Initial Findings

My initial research (Činčala, 2002, p. 239–248) indicated that the Czech people were not as irreligious as they appeared in official polls. Whereas 60% of the Czechs claimed no formal profession of faith, 99% of the studied Czechs believed in a higher power and were not necessarily opposed to spiritual faith. Thus, more accurate statements regarding Czechs' beliefs might be summarized as, "People doubt the importance of the church, not faith," or "For the majority of atheists, God is not an alien concept; however, the way in which the church presents him has left them angry."

A deeper look into Czech history provides some explanation for the attitudes and worldview of Czechs. In the days of John Huss, there was a spirit of criticism directed at the church; that criticism remains part of the national consciousness. However, unlike Huss, most of today's Czechs have stayed away from organized religion. Their faith is marked by intense reservations; the past has left deep wounds on the soul of this nation.

During the communist regime, the pressure for uniformity and the "no religion" policy impacted peoples' self-worth; the government's efforts to discourage individuality and to create a culture where all members were equal undermined people's sense of uniqueness and value. Freedom of thought was limited, particularly in religious matters, and the fear of what others might think kept people away from the church. The critical spirit that has long permeated Czech thinking led many to doubt the value of religious institutions. After the Velvet

Revolution, the gap between church and society grew wider, and by the second half of the 1990s, disillusionment with organized Christianity had built a strong wall separating people from churches. Faith gradually became a completely private matter, and by the time the 2011 census was conducted (as shown in Figure 1), 45% of the population was not willing to identify with a religion.

The Christian Church in general (and especially the Catholic Church) was viewed as like other public institutions, an organization lacking relational elements such as love, trustworthiness, and friendship. Moreover, the church was not able to answer many questions, specifically concerning controversial issues important to the Czech people, such as questions concerning the counter-reformation, the church's part in foreign occupation, the church's role in wars and outrage, the church's claims for restitution, and the church's reputation for wanting power and control. Additionally, the church was perceived as an institution that was constantly asking for sacrifice, be it through money, volunteer work, or in other ways. It was often associated with the loss of freedom, happiness, friends, a sense of self, comfort, and, to some degree, even the loss of peace. It would take time and effort to win back the confidence of the Czech people; the bias against the church had grown too strong. For an increasing number of non-believers, the church had stopped mattering (Cincala, 2005, p. 172).

For that reason, I developed a strategy for reaching Czech people—a method that would take into consideration the context of both the culture and the existing churches. Without plausible bridges of communication, God's tremendous love and desire to save lost people would not make sense in the Czech atheistic worldview.

Launching an Outreach Center

I was born in Czechoslovakia in 1970 and moved to the United States in 1994 to study at Andrews University. After completing my degree, I returned to Czechoslovakia—by that time, known as the Czech Republic. In 2003, I stepped away from formal ministry as a pastor and began working as a missionary in the field. It was during this period that I entered into a time of searching, prayer, and waiting (see Phase 1, Figure 2). My wife and I, along with a small group of women from our church, prayed for several years about how to reach people in our

hometown of Liberec. However, we did not know what kind of ministry would be effective and appropriate. Through providential circumstances, we were offered rental of a facility in downtown Liberec. Within this space, we dreamed of bringing together people from all facets of life. The newfound freedoms in the post-communist Czech Republic had created divides, and we desired to create a space connecting young and old, rich and poor, disabled and healthy, politicians and common citizens. Thus, the Generations Center was born. Various ways of reaching people and growing community connections were explored, leading to our purpose statement, “To build healthy relationships, foster personal growth, and live better lives.”

The following thirteen years (2006–2018) were filled with various outreach activities, as well as working with children, youth, families, and senior citizens (see Phase 2, Figure 2). The Center became a place where mothers and fathers could spend time with their children, where children attended preschool, and where various interest clubs, leisure activities, and programs took place. People came because their friends invited them or because they had heard positive things about the Center from those around them. The small Christian leadership team was to the growing numbers as “salt” is to the “soup” of life. The work progressed through simply loving people, mingling with them, building relationships, and entering their networks.

Despite a desire—and several attempts—to speak about God and teach the Bible, for a long time, there seemed to be no interest in such topics from the visitors. Because the Center was incarnational, people did not even know they were attending a “Christian” center. By the time they learned the Center was led by Christians, they felt safe. Often, they shared their fear of being pushed or imposed upon by the church. They simply needed more time (see Phase 3, Figure 2). Thus, we simply continued building relationships and serving the community, waiting until the time was right to share the good news of Jesus.

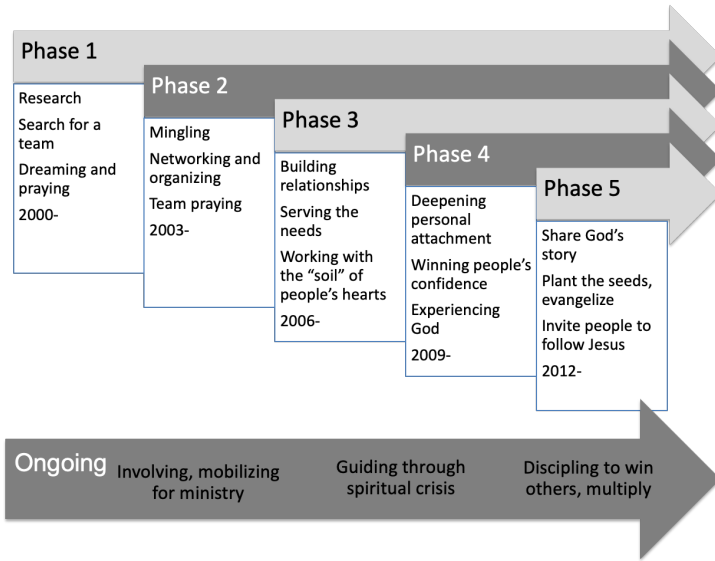


Figure 2. *Phases of mission, with each phase building on the previous.*

Gospel Generation Choir

The Gospel Generation Choir was an initiative of the Generations Center, born out of an adult English class in early 2007. Five students, all on maternity leave, enjoyed spending time with their English teacher, who loved music. They thought that singing songs in the style of the movie “Sister Act” would be a fun idea. These five students invited their friends to join. Although most of these women claimed to be atheists, they did not mind singing Gospel songs in English (their second language). Over time, the group grew numerically and became a close-knit community. They would meet once a week for two hours, bringing their children, sometimes spouses, and spend time together, talking and singing beautiful, heart-touching songs, all while worshipping God—often without realizing it (see Phase 4, Figure 2).

In the early days of the Gospel Generation Choir, we were inexperienced and unprepared for the many hurdles we would encounter. Before one performance, we arrived at the venue to discover there was no sound system in place. I could not help but smile as I told the group, “This is what I call trouble!”

There is a well-known adage in Czech that says, “Every atheist prays when in trouble.” On this occasion, we were desperately in need of prayer. So, I said to the group, “Did you know that God has a special P.R. interest in listening to the prayers of atheists and answering them? Can you please pray with me, since God knows I am already a believer?” The group laughed, knowing I was joking to some degree, but they prayed. And while they knew that they did not possess a special “in” with God, there was no denying that things happened, and God moved—even if the choir members did not want to admit it was Him. In this case, we were able to deliver a quite moving performance *without* a sound system, using only one microphone and speaker to amplify our small cassette tape player.

Over time, members would bring prayer requests to the group, and a brief conversational prayer was spoken, or a song was sung in a prayerful spirit, thinking of that particular situation. Again, while many of these prayers were brought before the Lord in a spirit of desperation (that is, with no true belief that God was even real), there was no doubt that God was working in the lives of these choir members. Although many of them were not ready to go to church or study the Bible in the open, their hearts were soaking up God’s love through singing, their interactions with other people, kind words, and prayer.

Since its conception, the Gospel Generation Choir has grown to be the largest Gospel choir in the country. The choir has performed more than 200 concerts in public spaces, church buildings, senior homes, weddings, and various other locations. The singers, as well as countless people around them, have experienced God’s presence and have learned more about His providence. The choir forms a circle and prays before each performance, and often during rehearsals (see Phase 5, Figure 2). Along the way, some of the members have been baptized, creating a beautiful opportunity for the choir to function as a spiritual family. A handful of people even joined the local church plant (see Ongoing, Figure 2), and made a commitment to serve God in various functions of the outreach, utilizing their spiritual gifts.

Against all odds, 20 years after the Velvet Revolution in 1989, spirituality was present and blossoming amidst the secular society! People have sought to connect with a higher power. They desired to grow personally and to live in harmony. The challenge is no longer to

engage people in spirituality, but to connect secular people with the loving God, their Creator, and teach them to accept the authority of His Word (Cincala, 2010).

Today, the Gospel Generation Choir continues to meet; in fact, the original choir has grown so that there are now three choirs in the Czech Republic, in Liberec, Jablonec, and Zelezny Brod. The children of the founding choir members are now old enough to join the choir and sing along. There is also a choir for senior citizens, called Matylda a Tylda, which is an offshoot of the original Gospel Generation Choir. Every time I return to the Czech Republic to visit, I meet with the leaders for reflection and encouragement. Although the choirs are quite diverse—made of people with different understandings of spirituality—the positive Gospel values such as mutual respect, support, and love for one another have prevailed.

The spirit of community has grown strong, allowing people to develop a sense of belonging. All the members have been on a journey, each at a different stage as they pushed forward at their unique pace. Various activities have impacted members of the community in different ways, such as one of the Gospel Generation Choir's more recent Christmas concerts which included the participation of several black Gospel singers from the United States (Figure 3, <https://youtu.be/CZzOwxwv1vc>); all the participants sensed God's powerful presence (Figure 3).



Figure 3. *The Gospel Generation Choir, a Part of the Missional Outreach Model.*

In addition to the Gospel Generation Choir, there have been many other ways the Generations Center has worked with people, meeting their needs, and connecting with them relationally. The whole process, however, has been different from what the church plant leaders had expected concerning ministry. Both those who came to the Center out of curiosity and those who have regularly attended some activity of their choosing have been able to be part of a small community that somehow responded to their level of spiritual interest, whether it be latent and hesitant or deeper and engaged.

Those who would never attend explicitly religious activities have been able to become part of a community with believers. The different groups and activities that the Generations Center offered has allowed them to experience God, whether they realized it or not (see Figure 4). In this way, belonging is preceding believing (Rice, 2002); that is, these people belong to a community before, and perhaps long before, they believe in its Leader. People have the freedom to stay at their current level of commitment or move to the next level.

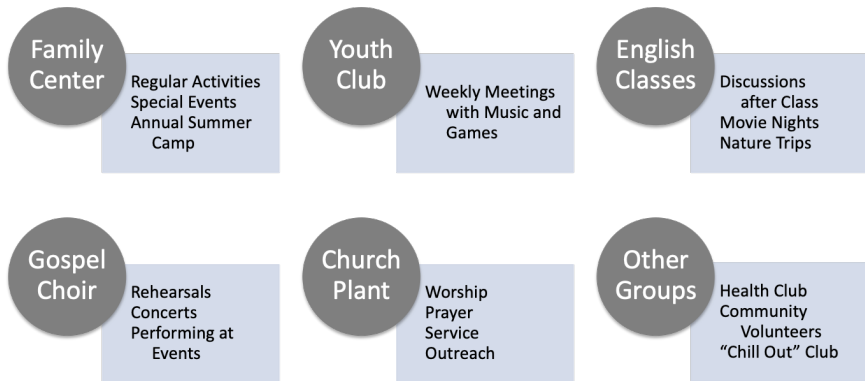


Figure 4. *Relational groups within the spiritual foster family of the Generations Center.*

This model has allowed people to be part of a community, a sort of relational or spiritual foster family. For example, English courses for senior citizens started in 2006. The seniors met regularly, determined to learn a new language. Very soon, however, these people realized that

the Center offered much more than merely English courses. They were inspired by their teacher to connect with and support each other. Instead of dropping the class and being discouraged if they did not make any significant progress in learning, they remained involved in the class, some even seven years later, because the English class met their deeper needs. At the same time, they could join other activities, meetings, or events and be exposed to the loving, Christian spirit of the Center. With few exceptions, it took several years for most people to reach a point of starting to believe in the Christian God. However, it did not take long for them to learn that they had a “pastor” who would pray for them or a friend who cared for them, someone whom they could count on in time of need.

This level of connection was especially true for the groups engaged in the fourth phase of mission and beyond. Countless stories related to other ministries could be described here, including summer camps with families, work with youth, and the launch of a national campaign supporting healthy marriage. These ministries each provided space to meet with people, minister to their needs, allow them to experience God’s love, and win their confidence. In this missional work with secular people, the receptivity of people to relationships, to a positive emotional environment, and to participating in meaningful services (such as volunteering in the community) was underlined again and again.

Once relationships were built and cherished (Phases 4–5), people were more open to God. They may not have been open to coming to evangelistic meetings or attending Bible studies, but they looked forward to Christian concerts, festivals, rehearsals, and art sessions. They enjoyed watching Christian movies, listening to Christian stories, and singing Christian songs. Interestingly, the English language was often more appropriate for these, because, in the Czech language, religious words are filled with negative connotations; for many Czech people, religious words feel almost as if they are taboo. Speaking them in English gives new life and brings new connotations to the same concepts.

Since its conception in 2002, the Generations Center has borne much fruit. The Gospel Generation Choir experienced its first baptism in 2009, and 20 or so more people were baptized before I left in 2014. In 2018, the nascent church stopped renting the building used as the Center in order to focus on the programs and ministries that the group

felt God wanted them to prioritize. Moreover, due to COVID-19, the Liberec choir has not been able to meet for many months; as a result, one of the choir members organized weekly home church worship meetings for the choir members to attend.

This missional outreach model has fostered spiritual healing of the wounds in the Czech psyche as described at the beginning of this article. It has also been a part of a national shift concerning the Christian faith. This missional outreach model demonstrates a culturally relevant and indigenous expression of Christianity in one of the most secular contexts one can presently encounter.

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