

Diaconia is Celebrating Its 30th Birthday

In June 1989, Diaconia of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren renewed its activities after the fall of the communist regime. What did the beginnings of the renewed Diaconia look like? You can find out in the following interview with one of the organisation's founders, Zdeněk Bárta.

Zdeněk Bárta (1949) has so far managed to be a minister, a water meter reader, a deputy and a senator, all in one life. He was also one of the key people behind the founding of the ECCB's Diaconia. He has close ties with Diaconia's centre in Litoměřice, where he is chairman of the supervisory board and where he also works as a volunteer.

„We were prepared, but at the same time amazingly and completely lacking information.“

The communist regime banned Diaconia's work for a long time. In spite of this, it was not built from zero in 1989.

What did you know about Diaconia before 1989?

I was aware that Diaconia was a large social organisation in West Germany at the time. And I was wondering about how well off the Germans were. In the Czech Republic, the communists had banned Diaconia and driven Christians into their churches, in order to make them look like a bunch of "holy Joes". They succeeded to quite a large extent. I envied the Germans. Because when churches don't take part in social services, they do not fulfil one of their main missions.

Where did you gain information about Diaconia's work?

Within the church, I belonged to a group of people that focused on human rights. That was also why I signed the Charter 77 declaration. Social rights are an integral part of human rights. And as with many other things, the communist regime was not proceeding correctly in this field. This especially concerned people with various types of disability. They were herded into institutions, excluded from society. There were no barrier-free buildings, no substitutional family care. We knew this had to change, we were in touch with theologians, ministers and sometimes also Diaconia's workers from the West, and we would discuss these issues with them. They would come for non-official visits, often as tourists. Toward the end of the 80's, even the communist regime allowed public discussion about the necessity for changes in the social area.

Perhaps that is one of the reasons why it was possible for Diaconia to be founded before 17th November 1989.

We made good use of the years of discussions, we were prepared. When it became apparent the regime no longer had enough energy to eliminate independent initiatives, we got busy with organisational work. The first important preparational meeting for founding Diaconia took place in the Smíchov Protestant church in Prague. We agreed that Diaconia would be a church-established organisation, but that it would serve everybody, not only those that are part of the church. We also agreed that Diaconia would not work on a quid pro quo

basis: we help you, and you start going to church in return. This sounds natural today, but it was not so natural back then.

You were a Protestant minister at the time?

I was, but I had not been able to serve as a minister for a long time before that, because of my signing the Charter 77 declaration. That had made me an enemy of the regime, they took away my permission to serve as a minister. I was unemployed for a year, everybody was afraid to give me a job, since I was a dissident. Later, I started working as a water meter reader. However, I was not persecuted as much as some of my colleagues. I was protected by the Protestants from Chotiněves, where I had been working. The people in this village were Ukrainian Czechs, who helped free our country from the Nazis after WWII, together with the Red Army. They stayed after that. They were Christians, but also soldiers, fighters against fascism, so they were considered a "higher class" by the regime. They created something like a protective circle around me and as a result, the state security was not so hard on me. When the regime was starting to melt, I got my state permission back. On 1 January 1987, I was able to return to the pulpit. I thanked the authorities for allowing this to happen precisely ten years after the founding declaration of the Charter 77. As a result, I was interrogated again the day after that, warned by the state security that this was certainly not the way to behave now that I was able to get my job back.

You started working for Diaconia immediately after the revolution of 1989?

That was the original plan. However, in 1990 the first free election was about to take place and there were fears that the communists would once again win. It was necessary for the democratic parties to nominate any well-known candidates they could come up with. I was well-known, because I had been the leader of the Velvet Revolution in the Litoměřice region. So I became a deputy and stayed one until the next election in 1992. At the same time, we were renovating a house in Litoměřice which belonged to the local Protestants – that was where we were planning to begin Diaconia's work. The renovation cost five million crowns, which was a huge amount of money at the time. We received a large amount from the Swiss church organisation Hex, part of the fund was covered from a loan provided by the Jeronýmova jednota (Jerome's Union), a Czech Protestant foundation. In 1992, I moved, as a minister, from Chotiněves to Litoměřice, and Diaconia launched its activities.

How did you find out about who your clients would be and what they needed?

We were full of enthusiasm, but at the same time amazingly uninformed, basically we were just stupid... We built the premises, we elected a director and a lady who was in charge of finance, these were our first two employees. And then we went to the social department of the local authorities to ask who needed our help. They gave our inquiry some deep thought and then told us that the best thing to do would be to establish a club for wheelchair users. We sent word out to all the wheelchair users from the Litoměřice region, but there was no reaction from anybody whatsoever! Perhaps meeting in Litoměřice was the last thing any wheelchair user was interested in. So we started working on crisis prevention. During the communist era, the state always took care of people in need: they would either be sent to an institution or to prison. However, after the fall of the regime, this no longer applied, suddenly you would run into people on the streets with nowhere to go. Those were the ones we tried to help. As time went by, people with learning needs turned out to be the largest group of clients of the Diaconia Litoměřice centre. We also have an asylum house for mothers with

children and sheltered workshops, where the typical clients are people with a physical disability.

Who did you learn from in Diaconia's early days?

We gathered experience from the West, at various church and non-church facilities. For me, the most important lesson learnt was that apart from our work, we also had to be able to talk about what we do and look for opportunities to promote it. I can tell you a story to be more specific. In 1997, the Czech Republic was hit by severe floods, something our country had not seen for decades. As a social organisation, Diaconia participated in the aid on more of a symbolic level. However, our church organised a collection and raised a million crowns. We gave all this money to Adra, a humanitarian organisation which was very well known and very active during the floods.

How is this related to promoting Diaconia?

That was what we learned from the head of the Dutch foundation, Wilde Ganzen, when we came to visit him. We told him about what Diaconia did during the floods, we wanted to boast about how good we were. His reaction really caught us by surprise: he was very angry, in fact he was shouting at us. How could we have done this? We had missed a huge opportunity, he said. This was Diaconia's chance to gain publicity, how come we were not realising this?

So you got scolded in the Netherlands.

At the time, this mentality seemed unacceptable to us. Later on, however, we had to admit Wilde Ganzen was right. In order to gain support for your work, you need to be able to let others know you exist, promote your organisation. Keeping in mind our Dutch lesson, we provided substantial help in the 2002 floods. We also got in close touch with *Katastrophenhilfe*, the humanitarian division of German Diaconia. The Germans managed to collect more than they needed during flood fundraising campaigns and they donated 40 million to us. The Litoměřice Diaconia was also active in the nearby town of Terezín, so we were able to renovate houses and enhance Diaconia's services there. We are still very grateful for this today.

How did Diaconia grow in its early days? As the chairman of Diaconia's board of directors at the time, you were able to watch closely.

The good thing was that we started out early and despite our huge lack of experience, we had the basics thought through. As a result, we were able to establish quite a firm position in the new conditions after the revolution, the state counted on us. Thanks to Diaconia's first director, Karel Schwarz, we always managed to get enough financial support for our activities and Diaconia grew quickly. The one aspect we found difficult to cope with – especially those of us belonging to the church – was that our endeavours with Diaconia were sometimes not welcome within the church itself. We considered it natural that the church should engage in social work. And we were astonished by the fact that not everybody shared this point of view. We were often faced with mistrust, for which we could see no reasonable explanation. Perhaps we underestimated the fact that in terms of finance, Diaconia was in a completely different position to the church, which was indeed poor, each little expenditure was carefully considered. As opposed to this, Diaconia was operating with millions of crowns. This could have provoked some envy, and it took a long time to overcome this tension.

Did you succeed?

I think today, it is more clear that Diaconia is not competition for the church, it works the other way around. Thanks to Diaconia, the church is also more visible and comprehensible to non-believers. When I came to Litoměřice at the beginning of the nineties, the local congregation was tiny. It was made up of fifteen people and it kept getting smaller. Today, we have about 40 members, our church has many activities, families with children attend, the congregation has really livened up. The town knows that the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren exists.

(<http://e-bulletin.cz/eng/2019/04/16/diaconia-is-celebrating-its-30th-birthday-what-can-we-look-forward-to/>)

Diaconia is #1 in Special Education

Fifteen schools with over four hundred students: the ECCB's Diaconia ranks first in special education provided in the Czech Republic. However, Diaconia did not only earn its leading position because of the numbers. Another reason is that its schools are open to children with the most severe types of disability, including low-functioning autism. In addition, Diaconia offers two boarding schools – in Prague and in Merklín near Plzeň.

The approach at Diaconia's special schools is based on the premise that every student is original. While you'll find one sitting at his/her desk and behaving in an orderly manner, another will probably be moving around constantly, and yet another student might be so sensitive that even the slightest departure from the usual order will cause a huge disruption and will make the student scream so loud that the whole school can hear it.

One thing is certain: even a person with a very serious handicap is able to receive education. This does not necessarily mean they are going to learn to read and write. One can also show progress in learning how to communicate the fact that they are hungry, they feel discomfort or a desire for the company of another person. These do not represent trivia for people with disabilities and their close ones.

We rely on our teachers' expertise, experience and good will. And also on their individual approach, which means a small group of children per class is necessary. Diaconia's schools are family-type schools, that is one of our key principles.

(<http://e-bulletin.cz/eng/2019/04/16/diaconia-is-1-in-special-education/>)

Diaconia's important moments of 2018

Diaconia has opened a brand new home for elderly people, called Vyhlídka (View/Outlook) in Vsetín. The homey feeling of the facility as well, as the clever design of the garden, have certainly contributed to the fact that Vsetín's Diaconia won second place in the "NGO of the Year" state awards.

Diaconia has a number of restaurants and cafes where people with a disability work as waiters. A new café in the historical centre of Kolín has now been added to the list. Diaconia in Valašské Meziříčí has opened a praline-making factory, employing people with various types of disability.

Seven of Diaconia's workers have received the National Award for Best Social Workers. Two of them gained the main awards: Karel Novák, director of Diaconia Rolnička in Soběslav, and Helena Hingarová, a social worker from Diaconia Litoměřice, who also deservedly became the media star of Diaconia.

The nationwide advent collection organised by Diaconia, called "Shoeboxes", was an immense success. 38 822 gifts were collected for children from underprivileged families in the Czech Republic. A significant number of the ECCB's churches also participated in this project.

The Lent Collection, which mostly took place in the ECCB's congregations, raised 1.1 milion CZK. The funds were used to construct a playground and a community centre in a refugee camp in Zátarí, Jordan.

Diaconia's centres in Brno, Soběslav, Rýmařov and Valašské Meziříčí celebrated the 25th anniversary of their founding. Diaconia was also glad to actively participate in the celebrations of the ECCB's one-hundred-year anniversary.

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