

# CAREE COMMUNICATOR

Winter 2007

Editor: Paul Crego  
 Executive Secretary, CAREE  
 2921 10<sup>th</sup> St. NE  
 Washington, DC 20017-3407  
 (202)635-2930  
[pcrego@yahoo.com](mailto:pcrego@yahoo.com)

## From the Executive Secretary:

This issue of the CAREE Communicator includes two important articles. The first, written by Charles West is a summary of the life and work of Milan Opočenský who recently died. The second is a report from Paul Mojzes and Leonard Swidler on the important work done in the Republic of Macedonia that brought together leaders of the Jewish, Muslim, and Orthodox Christian communities for an unprecedented series of interreligious meetings.

I also want to take this opportunity to remind you of your membership dues for 2007. At the annual meeting in Washington, D.C. in 2006 we decided that the dues would be raised to \$50 per person. This includes your subscription to *Religion in Eastern Europe* and support for the sending of that journal to seminaries and other religious and theological schools in East Europe. Students are not required to contribute and those who retired and are on limited, fixed incomes may pay a smaller amount and we leave it up to your discretion. We also want to remind you that our status as a non-profit organization means that you may make additional tax-deductible donations for the continuation of our good work.

You may send your check made out to CAREE to me at the above address and I will send you an acknowledgement by mail, unless directed otherwise.

Our Annual Meeting will be either in late October or early November this year. Stay tuned for an exact date. We will not be meeting with AAR/SBL in San Diego.

## Milan Opočenský 1931-2006

Milan Opočenský was one of those rare theologians who lived and worked in Communist Europe (Czechoslovakia) during the years of the cold war, yet played an active role in ecumenical church affairs both during those years and after them. He was the son and grandson of pastors in the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren, itself a union of the followers of Martin Luther, John Calvin and Jan Hus. He was the last assistant to Josef L. Hromadka before the latter's death in 1969, and remained throughout his life a faithful follower and interpreter of

Christians Associated for Relationships with Eastern Europe  
[www.caree.info](http://www.caree.info)

Hromadka's theology. He was Professor of Theology and Social Ethics in the Comenius Theological Faculty in Prague, before and after the "Prague Spring" and its suppression by the Soviets; but he was caught up in the broader revolutionary ferment that swept through the churches in the rest of the world during the 1970s and 80s. He was for a time Europe Secretary of the World Student Christian Federation, which published his book, *Christians and Revolutions: a Breakthrough in Christian Thought*. Then, in the last years of his active career, he was called from his Comenius Faculty chair to become General Secretary of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches from 1989 to 2000. It was a post that brought out all his abilities as churchman, diplomat, Reformed theologian and prophetic witness.

Each of these stages calls for further elaboration. First, Opočenský was a pupil of Hromadka. He learned in his formative years what it meant to accept the Communist revolution, as his teacher did, as God's judgment on the breakdown of western Christian civilization, but also as bearing a promise of God of which Communists themselves were not aware. He shared Hromadka's participation in, and witness to, the socialist society which the Party was building, which gradually softened its brutality and led to the 1968 development of "socialism with a human face." It was an exhilarating time. Democratic changes modified collective farms and factories. The police relaxed and became friendly. Churches were freed from control and invited to exercise their influence in changing society. Substantive dialogue arose between Christian theologians and Marxist philosophers on matters of faith and understanding the human. A leading Marxist philosopher, Milan Machovec, could print *A Marxist Looks at Jesus*, and Hromadka could write and publish *Gospel for Atheists*. It all collapsed with the Soviet invasion. Hromadka protested, and, politically disillusioned, died soon after. Opočenský did not mention this collapse or reflect on its meaning in his later writings, though in a 1986 essay, "Christian Faith Challenged by History", he staunchly defends Hromadka's ministry up to 1968.

But the experience led to the second phase of his career, Christian participation in broader revolution around the world, as Europe Secretary on the staff of the World Student Christian Federation in Geneva from 1969 to 1973. *Christians and Revolutions* sketches the historical dimensions of it from Jesus through the Reformation, the nineteenth century and the twentieth century ecumenical movement to the World Conference on Church and Society in 1966. In those years he saw revolution as the dominant theme in society everywhere, challenging the west and driven by the political movements of Asia, Africa and Latin America. He believed that the World Student Christian Federation was the instrument of Christian leadership, the new form of the church taking shape in this world. "When Christians work for revolution," he quoted from the Theological Commission of the Christian Peace Conference, "they do not derive their right from an idea of revolution but from the Gospel. Thus the revolutionary aims of justice and humanisation which the revolution decides are not relativized." In this spirit he worked with others for four years to remake the WSCF in this image. It did not work. There was too much human revolution and not enough Gospel in their common effort. In 1973 Opočenský was abruptly called home by the Ministry of Culture of his government. But the book, with a supplement on the scientific and technological revolution, remains a monument to his vision then.

The third phase came much later. After several years on the faculty of the Comenius Theological Faculty in Prague, he was invited in 1989 to return to Geneva as General Secretary of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, a post which he held until his retirement in 2000. Here a different Opočenský emerged. The student of Hromadka is still there. The book of his reports, lectures, sermons and Bible studies during that time, compiled and presented to him at his retirement, is entitled *Faith Challenged by History*. The phrase is pure Hromadka, and Hromadka's theology permeates it. So does the prophetic drive that led both teacher and student to embrace different revolutions at different times. But in these years we first of all see Milan Opočenský the ecumenical servant of the church at work. He speaks not about revolution but about covenanting for justice and about political responsibility. His concern is for the churches, their unity, their responsibility and their mission in the world together. He became a theologian in general for the Reformed churches. In his annual reports he defined and redefined the special perspective and contribution of the Reformed tradition for the member churches. In dialogue with other confessions about faith, theology and social witness he brought that tradition into ecumenical dialogue and community. One of his most beautiful talks was on "The Beauty and Service of Theology" to a Reformed-Syrian Orthodox conference in India. He even confessed to a clergy conference in the United States that he felt a little impoverished not having been, as four generations of his ancestors were, a parish minister, for "To be a preacher and a local minister is really the crown of all theology."(p. 202)

Milan Opočenský, a theologian in the tradition of Josef Hromadka, a revolutionary with a theological compass, and finally an ecumenical statesman who loved the church and who never lost his passion for the power of God in Christ to overcome the powers of the world – perhaps we should join him in saying, as he said so often, "The Lamb has conquered; let us follow him."

Charles C. West

Unknown  
Today, 8:08 AM  
Deleted: Paragraph Break

## **REPORT ON JEWISH-CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM COOPERATION AND DIALOGUE IN MACEDONIA**

At the International Jewish-Christian-Muslim Trialogue Conference in Skopje, Macedonia in May of 2002, three main commitments were made: 1) The heads of the religious communities would meet regularly; 2) there would be set up a Council of Interreligious Cooperation (hereafter CIC) with representatives from each of the religious traditions; and 3) the two theological faculties (Orthodox Christian and Islamic) pledged to cooperate. The United States Institute for Peace provided a grant of \$30,000 in 2004 to promote the work of the CIC. The basic activities carried out under this grant was the purchase of books and multiyear subscriptions for journals on peace-making and dialogue, in three trips to Skopje by scholars to promote, facilitate, and evaluate the work of CIC, one visit by two Macedonian members of CIC

Christians Associated for Relationships with Eastern Europe  
[www.caree.info](http://www.caree.info)

to the U.S.A.. and a series of four workshops on interreligious confidence building, cooperation and dialogue carried out by members of CIC in four different locations in Macedonia. Initially a number of email and telephone consultations took place as to when and how best to implement the grant. As is often the case with this type of work in Macedonia the communication with them and their responses were slow. Finally we worked it out with the members of CIC to continue to have what was for Leonard Swidler and Paul Mojzes the sixth visit to Macedonia since 2001.

October 10-17, 2004, a visit was led by Profs. Paul Mojzes and Leonard Swidler, who were accompanied by Rabbi Reuven Firestone (US), Prof. James Payton (Canada), Rev. Peter Baktis (US), and Prof. Mahmud Aydin (Turkey). It was deemed important to have representatives of the religious traditions present in Macedonia: Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Judaism - in numerical order in Macedonia.

Invitations were extended to the visiting scholars by the representatives of both the theological faculties, the Orthodox and Muslim. The first day we lectured for the faculty, students, and visitors of the Islamic Theological College, the main presentation being made by Prof. Aydin, with the other five also speaking more briefly. A representative of the Orthodox Theological College also addressed the body. A lively and fruitful public discussion ensued with women and men students as well as faculty participating. The written paper of Prof. Aydin will be published by the Islamic college. The program was filmed by the Albanian language channel of Macedonian TV and shown to its viewers.

The second day was mainly given over to a similar series of lectures held at the Orthodox Christian college. Here Father Peter Baktis of the Orthodox Church of North America (and also a chaplain in the U.S. Army) and Prof. James Payton gave the main addresses, and Paul Mojzes and Leonard Swidler also spoke to the assembled faculty, students, and visitors. The papers of Father Baktis and Prof. Peyton will be published by the Orthodox college.

We learned that as a result of our 2002 Dialogue, with its resulting commitment on the part of the two theological colleges to collaborate, that there had in fact been a series of six exchange lectures, three each at both colleges by the other faculties. We also learned that the two Deans of the two theological faculties had appeared in a lengthy dialogue on public television. Further, there was this past summer a joint study camp for students from both the Orthodox and the Islamic colleges held in southern Macedonia - and further plans for major cooperation are afoot. We met with the representatives of four of the five religious traditions on the Council of Interreligious Cooperation, namely, the Orthodox (Prof. Ratomir Grosdanovski), Muslim (Dean Ismail Bardhi), Protestant (Rev. Mikhail Cekov), and Jewish (Mr. Viktor Mizrahi). The Catholic representative was unavailable. We also met with the heads of Catholic Relief Services (CRS). We visited again the head of the Orthodox Church of Macedonia Archbishop Stephan and had a lengthy and warm discussion with him, during which a number of concrete possible projects, such as the joint training of clergy in common pastoral concerns such as alcoholism, drugs, trafficking of women, battered wives and children... Lengthy conversations were also held with the two Jewish community leaders, Mr. Zdravko Shami (President) and Viktor Mizrahi (Coordinator). One day we traveled to Strumitsa where the Methodist Annual Conference was being held. Prof. Mojzes addressed them and we held brief discussions with the Methodist Bishop Heinrich Bolleter (Switzerland) and with the Protestant representative Rev. Mikhail

Christians Associated for Relationships with Eastern Europe

[www.caree.info](http://www.caree.info)

Cekov to the Council for Interreligious Cooperation. With the brother of President Trajkovski, Rev. Mojsej Trajkovski, we visited two Orthodox monasteries and had useful conversations about interreligious dialogues with monks and nuns.

We were unable to meet with the Catholic Bishop Joakim Herbut this time, though we had met with him on three prior occasions. (Bishop Herbut had died and was replaced by Bishop Kiro Stojanov, who had attended the 2002 conference.) We did not get to see the Reis ul Ulema Arif Emini (due to internal strife within the Islamic Community—he was later deposed), but our contacts with Prof. Ismail Bardhi, Dean of the Islamic Theological Faculty (who was also expelled from the Faculty due to the above mentioned strife) and some of his faculty kept our Islamic contacts strong.

We also met with Branko Crvenkovski, the new President of Macedonia (after the tragic death in a plane crash of President Trajkovski ). We were warmly received by him and encouraged to continue our work with the promise to collaborate with us in whatever way possible. We made a specific suggestion that the Government of Macedonia specify some public space in some property it owns to house the offices, library, and meeting space for the Council of Interreligious Cooperation. He promised to take this up at various levels of the government. In fact, we learned that the very next day there would take place a meeting at Ohrid of the heads of the religious communities of Macedonia (namely the expanded Council of Interreligious Cooperation) and the President, at his invitation, and that these meetings, including the President, would meet every three months hosted on a rotating basis. Needless to say, we are delighted that commitment number one has been auspiciously launched. A second meeting did take place in a Orthodox monastery near Skopje sometimes in the Spring 2005.

One evening Swidler and Mojzes were also invited to speak on interreligious dialogue at a Cultural Center in Skopje called Totchka (Point—Counterpoint). It was chaired by Prof. Slobodanka Markovska of the University of Skopje, and sponsored by the Center - which is partially supported by the Soros Foundation in Skopje, which also financed the translation into Macedonia the book *The Study of Religion in the Age of Global Dialogue* by Leonard Swidler and Paul Mojzes. Prof. Markovska arranged for the translation, which appeared in 2005. The small but very attractive Center was packed with young people (i.e., under forty), and the Macedonian language television crew was present doing interviews (we did not have an opportunity to see what the results were on public TV, but we do know that it was aired ).

We also met with Mr. Vladimir Milchin, the Director of the Soros Foundation in Macedonia, to inform him of our activities and give him copies of the book of the Macedonian/Albanian translation of the papers from the 2002 Trialogue. He seemed pleased with the concrete results.

We likewise visited the widow of President Boris Trajkovski, Mrs. Vilma Trajkovska, to offer our condolences and to learn about the beginning, but promising, work of "The Boris Trajkovski International Foundation." Both sides promised to stay in contact to see how we might be able to collaborate in the future on the causes that we both share. The last day we traveled to Ohrid and visited several Macedonian Orthodox monasteries on the way. We were all impressed by the new vitality of both the male and female monasteries and especially the significant number of very able young women nuns - often gifted university graduates - who have joined the monasteries in the past five years. We distributed a large number of English-language book versions of the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* entitled *Interreligious Dialogue Toward Reconciliation in Macedonia and Bosnia*, containing the papers from the 2002 Trialogue and picked up a few samples of the handsome publication of the Macedonian/Albanian translation thereof of which we published 1,000 copies to be disseminated among the five religious communities and others. We also delivered a box of English language books on various aspects of interreligious dialogue and peace-making for the Council that were purchased from the USIP funds.

Our visit ended with real satisfaction that significant progress has been made partially as a result of our efforts, and that even more can be realistically be looked forward to as various arrangements "on the ground" are going forward.

In order to provide training and exposure to international Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue Leonard and Paul--being program chairpersons of the 35<sup>th</sup> Annual Scholars Conference on the Holocaust and Churches that was held in Philadelphia, March 5-8, 2005, featuring Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue--invited Grozdanoski and Bardhi to participate at this conference and deliver papers. This was an important experience for them that not only helped them in seeing the broader dimensions of interreligious dialogue for confidence building and peace-making but also provided opportunities for the two of them to strengthen their relationship. In addition we held several extensive meetings with them and with Reuven Firestone, Peter Baktis, and Mahmut Aydin, who were also at the conference. We were able to arrange the impending trip of Reuven to Skopje in May. The papers of Grozdanoski and Bardhi were published in *Religion in Eastern Europe*, Vol. XXV, No. 3 (August 2005). The two of them along with Leonard Swidler participated in a panel that focused on Macedonia and Rwanda, entitled, "At a Fork in the Road: Prevention or Disaster."

Reuven Firestone, who was chosen by us as the evaluator of the grant from USIP as well as a contributor to the promotion of the work of CIC, visited Skopje May 3-12, 2005. His very extensive report was sent to USIP. His task was to evaluate the effectiveness of our work in Macedonia but he also lectured at the Islamic Theological School and Orthodox Theological School and networked with a large number of relevant persons.

October 8-13, 2005, Paul Mojzes and Leonard Swidler traveled for the seventh time to Skopje to meet primarily with CIC. Up to this point we had the distinct impression, occasionally communicated by email by some members of CIC, that CIC is meeting only when we come. So, Mojzes and Swidler met with the "Council for Interreligious Cooperation in Macedonia," to learn of their activities in the past year and to discuss with them their future work in which IIID could be of help. Those present were:

- a. Ratomir Grozdanoski (Secretary of the Holy Synod of the Macedonian Orthodox Church)
- b. Gjoko Gjorgjevski (Professor at the Orthodox Theological Seminary)
- c. Ismail Bardhi (Dean of the Islamic Theological Seminary)
- d. Jakub Selimoski (former Reis ul Ulema of Yugoslavia)
- e. Antun Cirimotic (Director of Catholic Relief Services of Macedonia)
- f. Slaven Azmanov (Pastor of the Methodist Church in Murtino), substituting for the hospitalized Mihail Cekov
- g. Viktor Mizrahi (The Jewish Community of Macedonia)

We learned that in the past year the Council has been working very well together, indeed! They spent four whole days at one point working together to produce a joint commentary on the bill that is before the parliament concerning state regulations of

Christians Associated for Relationships with Eastern Europe

[www.caree.info](http://www.caree.info)

religious communities. Rather than each group responding in isolation, the Council decided to produce a joint commentary - which they were able to accomplish unanimously! Bear in mind that in 2001 the Muslims and Orthodox were killing each other while falling into civil war, and the religious leaders were not talking with each other. They felt that their critique was well received by state authorities as well as by their denominational leaders.

In preparation for our meeting with the Council in session we were able to speak ahead of time at length individually with Ismail Bardhi (Dean of the Islamic Theological Seminary) and Ratomir Grozdanoski (Secretary of the Holy Synod of the Macedonian Orthodox Church) - representatives of the two largest religious communities by far - who also reported the increasing collaboration between the two theological seminaries.

CIC in conjunction with the IIID will organize a series of at least three one-day local training conferences on “Respecting Others Builds Up One’s Own Community,” aiming at bringing local clergy and lay leaders of different localities together in inter-personal encounters. The local trainers will be provided by the Council itself. The theme will be “By Respecting Others we Build-Up Ourselves”—a topic that was proposed and accepted by council members. The purpose is for local religious officials of the different faith-communities to get to meet and interact with one another—something not done previously. On our suggestion CIC agreed to rotate the chairmanship so that each of the five religious communities get their turn. Prior to that the lack of a chairman made them reluctant to convene meetings. For 2006 Dr. Ratomir Grozdanoski, currently dean of the Orthodox Theological School became chair and provided vigorous leadership. For 2007 the chairperson will be a Muslim, most likely Jakub Selimoski the former Reis-ul-Ulema for the former Yugoslavia. Tentatively they agreed that in 2008 the chairperson will be Catholic, in 2009 the United Methodist and in 2010 the Jewish representative. We came away from that meeting convinced that a turning point had been achieved where they are willing, indeed, eager, to work together on issues of common concern. Indeed, from reports by the Rev. Dr. Ratomir Grozdanoski we learned that they continued their regular meetings in Skopje at which they prepared comments on the impending Law on Religious Communities, the request to introduce religious education in public schools, including the accession of the Orthodox Theological School and the School of Islamic Sciences to the University of Skopje, and lastly the request for the return of church properties that had been nationalized by the Communists. They had discovered that speaking in a common voice they received a more serious hearing by the government as well as appreciation by their religious superiors.

We also met with Vladimir Milchin, Executive Director of the Foundation Open Society Institute Macedonia, to report on the progress made since meeting him a year earlier and discussed with him two suggestions on how to further cooperation among the religious communities of Macedonia, including the two specific ideas discussed at the

Council meeting. We were encouraged to apply for funds, which we did on two occasions, but received no funding.

Likewise we met with Gillian A. Milovanovic, the new U.S. Ambassador to Macedonia, and Michael D. Orlansky, Public Affairs Officer of the U.S. embassy, and informed them of the JES-IIID Trialogue work in Macedonia and presented them with the two Council suggestions on how to further cooperation among the religious communities of Macedonia. They advised us that if CIC were to apply for funding especially to continue the local training conferences, but this also did not materialize.

Having seen how successful they are, we supported the CIC plan to organize four training conferences or workshops. The first took place at Struga/Ohrid in February of 2006, the second in Tetovo in May 2006, the third in Strumica in June 2006 and the last in Prilep in December 2006. The Orthodox community took the lead on the first training conference, the Muslims the second, the Catholics and Protestants, the third and the Orthodox again the fourth. Judging from the reports and photos that have been received and forwarded to USIP, these workshops were among the most successful cooperative effort of CIC.

Leonard Swidler and Paul Mojzes plan to go one more time to Macedonia in October 2007 having been informed that they will be invited to a conference in Ohrid organized by the Republic of Macedonia Ministry of Culture and Religious Communities. This will give them an opportunity to get an update on the role of the religious communities to build confidence and work for peaceful relations among Macedonia's people.

Paul Mojzes and Leonard Swidler, Editors/Directors  
Institute for Interreligious, Intercultural Dialogue  
January 20, 2007