Concerning the attitude to the role of the bishop of the Moravian Church, the Czech Province carries on the attitude of the Ancient and Renewed Unitas Fratrum.

The role of the bishop in the Ancient Moravian Church (Unity of Brethren)

The Ancient Unity of Brethren was established as an expression of the desire of a group of brethren around brother Gregor to live together in obedience to the Lord, according to the Scriptures, and following the example of the apostles. This desire of the brethren was a renewal of the early church. An important step was taken in 1467 in Lhotka near Rychnov, when after long deliberation and prayers – they appointed their own bishops. This was done by drawing lots. In the words of brother Gregor: "We have entrusted the Lord our God, that He has chosen some to the office of apostle in place of His Son beloved Lord Jesus Christ" (Jan Blahoslav, About the Origin of Unity and Her Order). By drawing lots Matthias of Kunwald, Thomas of Prelouč and Elias of Chřenovic were chosen. Brother Gregor then testified that he was ahead of God's revelation that it will be these three.

The Ancient Unity understood bishops as successors of the Apostles. Initially, there were three bishops, and later their number was increased to four and then to six. Each bishop (senior) had several assistants (conseniors) to help him; the bishops along with assistants formed the board. The bishops were elected by the synod votes of all the priests (pastors), and were confirmed by current bishops.

The duties of the bishops are described in the then Church Order of the Unity of Czech Brethren. The main duty of the bishops was:

- “to guard that the Unity preserves the saving truth of pure teaching and a holy life.”

Other obligations were:

- “establish and ordain disciples, deacons, priests and conseniors to their offices”,
- “take care of all the priests and priestly youth as well as the widows and orphans of priests”,
- “ensure that promising youth were educated and diligently trained for the future needs of the church”,
- “take care of the Lord’s congregations in his diocese (to have their member lists, knowing the leading members of the congregation, to keep track of their needs and other circumstances)”,
- “soberly allocate appropriate spiritual administrators to congregations and once again for important reasons send them to other congregations as needed according to the joint resolution of bishops”,”
- “visit entrusted congregations in their own diocese (after the model of the apostles who repeatedly visited congregations established by them)”.

The role of the bishop in the Renewed Unity

After the Battle of White Mountain in 1620 the Unity in the Czech lands was refuted. From emigrants from northern Moravia - the descendants of the Ancient Unity - and other immigrants the Renewed Unity rose, with the help of Count Zinzendorf, in 1727 in Herrnhut. In this renewal the mentioned Church Order of Unity of Czech Brethren has played a significant role. The office of bishops according the brethren understanding was restored when Daniel Ernst Jablonski, who was Bishop of the Polish branch of the Ancient Unity, consecrated David Nitschmann (as "Bishop, overseer and shepherd of the Moravian congregations in foreign countries ") in 1735 and Count Zinzendorf (as " Bishop of the German - Moravian brethrens ") in 1737. Restoring of the office of bishops allowed the ordination of parsons and led to the support for missionary work (including pastoral support of newly founded congregations). In practice, however, the role of the bishop was narrower than in the Ancient Unity: While in the Ancient Unity the bishops were members of the Board, which led the Unity also administratively, in the Renewed Unity the role of the bishop was separated from the administrative leadership. Although initially some bishops (especially Zinzendorf and Spangenberg) played in the leadership of Unity a great role, but overall involvement of bishops in administrative bodies in the Renewed Unity (especially from the 19th century) is not very common.

The role of the bishop in the „Church Order of the Unitas Fratrum” (COUF) and “Bishops´ Handbook”

Currently in the Unitas Fratrum the office of a bishop is characterized in the Church Order of the UF (§ 687 - § 690). It is noted that the Renewed Unity received the episcopacy as an inheritance from the Ancient Unitas Fratrum, while there has been some progress: “Today we regard the episcopacy in the Renewed Unity in a different way from that of the Ancient Unitas Fratrum. Formerly, a Bishop had a church governmental and administrative function. In our day, however, this function is not necessarily linked to the episcopal office. We hold to the understanding, common both to the Ancient and Renewed Unity, that only Christ is Head of the Church and pastoral oversight is exercised in responsibility to Him.” Tasks of the bishop in COUF are characterized as follows:

- A Bishop as a Bishop has responsibility primarily for providing pastoral care to pastors and the Church and assisting the Church in its faithfulness to Christ and the Gospel.
- All Provincial and District Boards shall consult a Bishop or Bishops in all matters concerning the work in the Province or District which fall within the Bishop’s sphere of responsibility.
- A Bishop has a special duty of intercession for the Unity and also for the Church of Christ as a whole.
- Bishops in active service should be enabled to visit congregations for the deepening of their spiritual life.
- The opinion of a Bishop (Bishops) shall customarily be sought and given due consideration and weight in matters of doctrine and practice.
- A Bishop represents the Church in the act of ordination.
• A Bishop (Bishops) should share in the decisions regarding the training of candidates for the ministry and should maintain a special pastoral relationship with such candidates throughout their training.

• The Synod of the Bishop’s Province may also add administrative responsibility by electing him a member of the Provincial Board.

During the decade of the 1980s the desire for mutual meetings grew among the bishops. The Czech bishop br. Ulrich implemented the thought and the first meeting of bishops was held in 1992 in former Czechoslovakia. (Since then, a similar meeting occurs once every seven years.) At that meeting, the role of the bishop was discussed more deeply and in relation to that the manual "Bishop Handbook" was made, which was subsequently accepted by the Unity Synod in 1995.

In the manual "Bishop Handbook" the role of the bishop is analyzed with more details, on the basis of relevant articles COUF. It is noted that all ministry in the church derives from Christ and His ministry: He is "the Shepherd and Bishop of our souls" (1.Pt 2.25). It expressed the Renewed Unity in 1741, when all authority in the Unity subordinated to the Lord as the Chief Elder. True understanding of the episcopate necessarily depends on a personal relationship with the Lord of every bishop. Equally important is the personal relationship of each bishop to brothers and sisters in the church (including other bishops, members of the Provincial Board and Synod). It is emphasized that the office of a bishop is closely connected with the work of the Holy Spirit.

Restoring the episcopal ministry in the Czech Province

The Moravian Church in the Fatherland could not legally operate for two hundred and fifty years; a work of the Unity was restored here in the second half of the 19th century. The first bishop after returning to the land of the fathers was consecrated in 1946, who was Václav Vančura. The second bishop was consecrated in 1948, who was Karel Reichel. In 1967 Adolf Ulrich was consecrated, who, for a long time, was the last bishop. (During the next 44 years, there was no consecration of a bishop there.) At that time the Communist regime ruled in our country for decades, the church was damaged internally and externally, and the ministry of the bishop could also not be developed. After the fall of communism in 1989, the internal renewal of the church began, which has allowed the gradual restoration of the episcopal ministry. This was restored gradually, by continuous development. (At the time of the fall of communism the last living bishop was over 80 years old. The election of a new bishop in the first phase failed.)

In addition to his old age, there was not a normal functioning of the province because there was only one bishop and when the Provincial Board was not in unity with him, there were no ordinations of new ministers, which threatened the very essence of the functioning of the church. From this historical lesson from the Ancient Unity and also from the near past, our province is coming to understand that more bishops allows both the normal development of the church, and also gives an insurance in the event of a dispute, misunderstanding or age, that the ministry of the bishops will not cause a break in the progress of the church. A higher number of bishops eliminate this office character of exclusivity and directs it where it should be, to the level of ministry to the church.
Following the example of the Ancient Unity the principle was adopted that all members (including pastors of congregations) should be ministered to pastorally: “Because everyone in the Unity under discipline should be and must have, from a child to an old, from a serf to a master, from a disciple to a bishop” (Church Order of the Unity of Czech Brethren).

Methods of the work of the bishops in the Czech Province

In the Czech province a work of the bishops in practice focuses on ministry to the pastors of congregations and also on ministry to the congregations themselves. Each pastor of a congregation chooses one of the bishops to serve to him as a pastor (shepherd) and the elders of each congregation elect another of the bishops to serve the congregation as a coach.

The bishop with his wife ministering as a shepherd visits the family of the pastor regularly as needed six to eight times a year. The shepherd is helping his colleague in Christ to maturity and to develop his gifting. The prerequisite is a strong relationship of trust, friendship and partnership.

The bishop serving as a coach attends the congregational meetings regularly as needed five to eight times a year. The vision of the coach is to support growth of the congregation based on Eph 4, 7-16 „to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ” - in practice this is support for qualitative growth, changing the mentality of congregations from selfishness toward ministry to society, planting other congregations, etc.

In addition to regular visits the bishop who serves as shepherd or coach is permanently available via email, telephone or Skype. In case of an emergency they immediately visit an pastor or congregation.

The bishops in their ministry to congregations are complementary and mutually coordinated. It is therefore important that the province has more bishops. Teamwork is also manifested as the bishop often brings someone else along when he ministers thus facilitating the growing up of other ministers from among the presbyters.

The bishops regularly meet 6 times a year with the Provincial Board for mutual encouragement, exhortation, and accountability. At the same time they coordinate with each other their activity in the congregations they minister to and forward the results to the Provincial Board for executive decisions.

The bishops together with the Provincial Board bring vision for the church and its development through various educating and encouraging meetings such as a Pastoral Conference, a Provincial Gathering of Congregations, youth gatherings, meetings of leaders of family centers or senior centers, etc. Since the bishops are still in the field, they are familiar with the condition of the congregations and ministers so they can bring spiritual and practical insights into the condition of congregations, send ministers to new places, change ministers in congregations, appeal or execute discipline and they forward results to the Provincial Board for executive decisions.

We see the role of the bishop as necessary to build the body of Christ, we all come to the unity of the faith and full growth into the fullness of the person of Christ (Eph. 4:12-13).
The mission of the bishop shepherd

- assumes a strong relationship of trust, friendship and partnership
- bases on an understanding of both sides, on the one hand there is the older and more experienced in Christ (this is given by the credit of Christ and the fruit of his ministry) and on the other hand a younger or less experienced
- helps his colleague in Christ to maturity and the development of his skills and gifts
- advises him in his family situation, possible marital conflicts and in the upbringing of children
- encourages some of them to further study and becomes a mentor to those who receive further education
- helps him also in difficult pastoral circumstances in his congregation

The mission of the bishop coach

- To help congregations to grow in qualitative characteristics, which are: equipping leadership, ministry focusing on the whole devotion to Christ, fervent devoutness, functional structure, inspirational worship, comprehensive pastoral care of the congregation, evangelism focused on the needs of people outside the church and loving and true relationships.
- To assist congregations to change their mentality from selfishness to the mentality of openness to the outside world. This means to focus not only on the growth of their own congregation, but to rise and send ministers to various ministries, establish new congregations, schools, centers of various public services, reach the places where we live and participate in the global mission, etc.

Conclusion

Bishops have therefore in their ministry a dual focus – on pastors of congregations (shepherding) and the entire congregations (coaching). Within of the development of the work and the growing needs of the ministry they become the guarantors of this system, which ensures that the whole church is growing together and has sufficient regular care to bring the kingdom of God to the nation. The bishops have no executive power; their proposals for possible changes for the congregations are transmitted to the Provincial Board for decisions. The bishops should therefore minister to the church to grow in the fullness of the person of Christ (Eph 4:11 n), and at the same time they are also at the forefront of the education of their followers in this ministry, whether these followers will eventually be elected as a new bishops or not. The cost of this service by the bishops (mainly salary and travel expenses) is paid from the budget of the province.