

...BRIDGES... Number 2, 2009: "90 Years: Looking Back and Moving Forward!"

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Autumn, 2008 was such a lively time in the life of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren that memories of those special days continue to abound in 2009. Thus, this BRIDGES will be devoted to the celebration of ECCB's ninetieth anniversary, which took place on November 20-21, 2008. Of course, I was so involved in the "behind-the-scenes" preparations, which were necessary for that event to happen, that my view of the celebration is rather atypical. Indeed, I jokingly called the Central Church Offices "a working building" (recalling Prague's "dancing building"), as a co-worker and I left at 10:00 p.m. to get a few hours sleep before continuing our concentrated effort to get documents, folders, gifts, and practicalities ready before our international guests arrived. Every time I would breathe a sigh of relief at having finished an assigned task, the phone would ring, and I would hear a team-mate saying, "Joyce, we need someone to....." Thus, a trip to the airport to pick up Jody Filipi, who – along with Roger and Sue Shoemaker – represented the PC(USA) at the anniversary jubilee, proved to be a welcome break.

Likewise, a seminar on "The Role of the Holy Scripture in the Life of Reformed Churches," which was held at the Protestant Theological Faculty on November 20, offered a valuable change of focus. That seminar was complemented by a special anniversary edition of the Bible, which contains both the Kralice translation from 1579-93 and the current ecumenical translation on facing pages. Thus, homage was paid to the reformation emphasis on "the free preaching of the Word of God," which was one of "The Four Articles of Prague" articulated in 1420.

The reflective spirit of the anniversary event continued the next day at Salvator Church, as papers were presented on the theme, "Freely and Without Fear," and as a panel discussed the forms that the Czech "Protestant identity" has taken and may yet assume. Unfortunately, I cannot summarize those parts of the program because I spent the entire day staffing an information table for international guests. However, as I settled into that enjoyable task, I was struck by the fact that I was sitting with my back to the congregation and my face toward the door. I wondered, was I thus symbolically looking away from what had been and toward what would be? Or would such an orientation be possible or desirable in such a historically-rich denomination?

When the afternoon worship service began, I joined Jody and the Shoemakers in reserved seats at the front of the sanctuary. There, I still had my back to most of the worshippers. However, in that context, past, present, and future were united as the timeless nature of biblical texts, beloved hymns, hopeful

challenges, and Holy Communion materialized. Past and future were reconciled in that memorable moment, just as they were as various choral groups performed throughout the day and at a special evening concert.

For me, however, the most memorable bridge between past, present, and future had already been built the previous night at a dramatic reenactment of the ECCB's history. The script for that event called for Cardinal Miroslav Vlk to stand in the pulpit of Bethlehem Chapel where Jan Hus' stirring sermons became the impetus for the Czech Reformation in the early 1400s. While there, the Cardinal was to be asked how he feels about the ECCB's reformation heritage.

That remains a delicate topic since the deep wounds left by the brutal, Catholic-launched Counter-reformation still have not been totally erased. Yet, God's grace and power were clearly at work as Cardinal Vlk eloquently identified the common truths and commitments that bind the Czech Protestant and Catholic communities together. Applause rippled, grew, and crescendoed, as the Cardinal assured his Protestant friends that the Christian community is essentially one in Christ. Many meaningful moments characterized that creative program, which brought the ECCB's experiences during the Nazi occupation and the communist era to life. However, the spirit of joy, hope, and reconciliation, which filled the historic chapel as the Cardinal's remarks were received and embraced, was uniquely palpable. In that moment, past and future surely were reconciled in a way that demonstrated, and affirmed, God's presence in our own day.