

BRIDGES

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From time to time, I have heard people use the phrase "oh, what a tangled web we weave" to introduce a classical truism about duplicity. However, when actual spider-webs capture rays of sunlight, it is clear that the most natural and useful sorts webs are composed of intricate patterns that have been constructed with care and creativity. Thus, I am glad to report that the image of a "tangled web" was supplanted by a tantalizing image of a multifarious, but supple, web when the "American Working Group" met in Prague on April 25.

Webs had already begun to spin before that meeting took place. You see, this special gathering of the "American Working Group" was set up in response to an e-mail that arrived just prior to its regular March meeting. In that message, Roger Shoemaker, who has assumed a central role in the steering committee of the newly established Czech Mission Network, indicated that he and his wife, Sue, would like to meet with the "American Working Group" during a visit to Prague in April.

At that time, we had no idea that another Presbyterian couple with significant Czech connections would be in Prague during the same period. However, in mid-April, Ondřej Stělik—a gifted Czech pastor who moved to the USA to serve a congregation in Binghamton, New York three years ago—put John in touch with some important leaders from his congregation who were preparing to come to Prague to formalize a long-standing relationship between the University of Rochester and the Czech Technical University. Thus, we were delighted to be able to welcome Roger and Gloria Westgate to a very special session of the "Working Group" that Ondřej had chaired at the time of its formation over ten years ago. These auspicious coincidences suggest that webs were already spinning, independently of our efforts, long before April 25.

Yet, simultaneously, several people in various places were directly involved in web-weaving as they nurtured potential contacts with care. Thus, the practicalities involved in discovering and fostering existing ties were a focal point of the discussion that occurred when Jan Dus (the Chairperson of the American Working Group), John, Roger, Sue, and I enjoyed a working lunch together on April 25. As we considered the intricacies of trans-Atlantic communication, it was exciting to anticipate the connections that will be enabled by the Czech Mission Network's new website. Yet, it was also encouraging to learn that this technological instrument is not viewed as being an end in itself, but instead, is designed to facilitate the formation of living relationships between actual human beings who have an interest in the faithful people who compose the ECCB.

Throughout the lunch hour and the meeting that followed, an amazing number of connections came to light. And, as the members of the "American Working Group" reported on relationships which presently exist between Presbyterians in the U.S.A. and the Protestant Theological Faculty, the Diaconia, and congregations of the ECCB, tangible ideas about ways to develop and foster those ties began to suggest themselves. Thus, the Shoemakers left the meeting with

several pages of notes that may guide them as they seek to link the 'Czech-American webs' that are already spinning independently, but vitally, in many places.

I left the meeting with a genuine sense of enthusiasm that I wanted to pass along to you. However, the intricate designs and paradoxical dynamics of webs cannot be easily converted into words. Nevertheless, I want to conclude these reflections with a recollection that Sue Shoemaker shared about an encounter she and Roger had when visiting a village in Moravia several years ago. Near the end of an evening gathering which was attended by over twenty people, a quiet young man expressed gratitude that he had been able to meet some Americans who are not like television serials and movies. 'That is what it is all about,' Sue thoughtfully said, 'replacing images of Dallas and hamburgers with relationships among real people.' From my perspective, the Czech Mission Network is exactly that: a means of bringing real people with real commitment into a beautiful web of relationships. If you would like to become part of this pattern, please send a note to me at the address that is listed in the cover e-mail, and I will make sure that Roger and the Network steering committee know of your interest. Thank you for choosing to be involved in helping us create a magnificent web together!