

**... BRIDGES ... Number 5, 2005: Revitalizing Church and Preserving Culture**  
prepared on behalf of the Czech & American Mission Networks by Joyce Michael, mission co-worker with PC(USA)

In May, John and I had occasion visit the building which houses the Vinohrady congregation of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren on two occasions which, on the face of it, may seem to be fundamentally different, but which, on a deeper level, may be vitally related.

The Vinohrady building – whose walls are adorned with striking paintings by Miroslav Ráda, whose artwork gives compelling expression to the contemporary significance of biblical stories – is the location of the ECCB's equivalent of the General Assembly. Thus, John and I made our way there on a cool Friday evening to attend a special session that was focused on “building up congregations” or, in American parlance, on “church revitalization.”

Moderator Ruml and Lay Moderator Čejková had already told me a bit about the direction that this conversation might take. Thus, I was anticipating that a lively discussion of the practical forms that a new, more equalitarian relationship between pastors and lay leaders might take. However, the dialogue, which unfolded after the few moments of polite silence that followed introductory remarks, was more impassioned and varied than I had expected. Indeed, a comprehensive report that had been prepared by a special task force elicited many comments about a wide-range of topics, many of which are also of concern to churches in western Europe and America.

Particular attention was given to the different needs of city congregations, which are thriving, and village congregations, which are in decline. heartfelt affirmations of the worth that all congregations have for their participants led me to conclude that churches must be nurtured in very individual ways that take account of their unique qualities, their specific needs, their particular potentials. It seems to me that when it comes to building up churches, patterns may be proposed, but it may never be assumed that ‘one size fits all.’ Thus, it may be that the discussion of church revitalization at this year's Synod (i.e., GA) did not give rise to a blueprint for maximizing the potential of ECCB congregations and for dealing with the thorny question of how the church can move toward independence from state support. Yet, I was heartened by the respectful and direct ways in which a number of difficult questions were explored on the evening of May 20.

A few days later, John and I returned to the Vinohrady Church for a mid-week concert and lecture that had been organized by the International Dvořák society. The musical portion of the program featured a renowned pianist who had presented a fascinating program on Dvořák's piano music at the church which we attend in Prague 6 just days before he was the featured soloist at a major concert at the Rudolfinum. At the Vinohrady concert, Mr. Kvapil was joined by a baritone soloist who sang Dvořák's Biblical Songs, American spirituals, and other classic American tunes.

This rousing performance was complemented by a question-generated description of “little known” features of life in the United States, which was presented by a Czech woman who had spent a number of years in the American academic and professional community. Her informative, good-humored remarks addressed hard questions about American customs, practices, and perspectives in ways that went beyond stereotypic generalizations to issue in a fair, but honest, portrayal of life in the USA.

After the concert, we were greeted by a number of friends from various congregations in Prague, and I had a strong sense that the church had effectively fulfilled the role of preserving culture that evening. In the metropolis of Prague, that role is fulfilled by many secular institutions as well, while in rural settings, the church may serve as a unique mediator of cultural opportunities. However, it has been my experience that even in the big city, cultural events organized by churches are characterized by distinctive qualities of warmth, intimacy and community. Thus, it seems to me that a powerful tool for church revitalization is already in place in Protestant congregations that serve as transmitters of culture. The church may be particularly alive, inviting, and visionary whenever it provides occasions for people to come together in harmony to receive gifts of beauty, creativity, and contemplation that are ours by the grace of God.