

...BRIDGES... Number 6, 2006: A meditation on orientation by Regina Pešková
prepared on behalf of the ECCB's American Working Group and the PC(USA)'s Czech Mission Network

Joyce's note: In 2005, Regina Pešková, the general secretary of our partner church's denominational offices, began the autumn meeting of the American Working Group with a thoughtful meditation based on Genesis 28:17-19. Later, she translated her reflections into English, and our conversation class used her work to practice idiomization. When John and I arrived in the United States, I was surprised to find the original copy of Regina's translation in my "going to America" folder. As I read her reflections, they seemed to be remarkably appropriate at this point in time. Thus, with Regina's permission, I have adapted her reflections for this Bridges.

There are many churches in the centers of our cities and on village squares, which remind us of times long past. Although a number of churches were destroyed by war, they have been reconstructed with enormous devotion. Few churches have been abolished, but some have been built over pagan temples.

Why is this the case? Where does the human inclination to preserve churches originate? Churches and their spires used to be orientation points, sign-posts. For instance, in old paintings, we can see that church spires and domes rise above the other buildings. Anyone who has ever gotten lost and needed some orientation surely knows why such signs are so important. Then, sign-posts enable us to find a way that will take us further toward our destination – home. In less developed countries, sign-posts are regarded as sacred signs because they can save a traveler's life. But we may become even more lost in everyday living and the unsearchable depths of our souls when we realize that we have made the wrong decisions, are disappointed by our neighbors, or want to do more things than we can manage. In such cases, we need a sign, an indicator, a sign-post that says: "This is the right way."

Let's take a look at Jacob. He steals his brother's birthright, leaves his homeland, and wanders in the wilderness. Then he dreams of a ladder set up on the earth with angels of God ascending and descending on it. The angels assure Jacob that help is here, very near. God is here. "How holy this place is; it is the gateway of heaven." And what happens to Jacob? He takes courage and recovers his faith. He finds his way and his God. This sign-post means that we have found assurance, something that promotes faith; we have found our own way and discovered our God. Life is a series of tasks, challenges, and valleys that we can surmount if we know the way, if we can find God. So, we return to church time after time.

How is this connected to the church spire?
Jacob takes a stone, pours oil on it, and calls the place Beth-el, the house of God. Beth-el

becomes one of the greatest sanctuaries in the Old Testament. Churches are often erected similarly. The cornerstone is a memorial to God's help. The cornerstone and the spire say that it is possible to rely on God, even though there are situations in the life where everything seems lost and hopeless. God is near, although he seems to be far away. "He isn't distant, he stays in the center and listens to our urgent prayers." When we look out over the countryside from the top of a church spire, we sense that such a structure is like a rock on the sea bottom; the spire stands in the center of town and acts as a sign for our lives. Our personal orientation largely depends on the prevailing orientation in our society. When that gets lost, for instance, during wars or crises, the lives of individuals and of the whole get lost.

Church spires may act as sign-posts, not only for us as individuals, but also for the entire society. Church spires are signs that stand over earthly towns and point toward the eternal. The temporal empire ought to be oriented toward the kingdom of God. You might say that spires are only a reminder of the distant past, for churches are gradually getting lost in rows of other buildings. Yet, when we are facing the crisis of not being able to find the right way, good orientation is still helpful. The church still reminds us of the doctrine of the soul's salvation, of other people who have made life possible for us, of the love we have felt, and of the crises we have overcome. The church and its spire may still guide us through dark times, give us orientation, and restore our faith.

Church spires remind us that the human community needs a point of orientation. They reveal that God is the power behind the sign-posts, and offer confirmation that life's events have meaning, that trust is possible, that God's kingdom gives us a new chance. Church spires are sign-posts and exclamation points which offer living reminders of the Bible's stories and of the ways and words of Jesus. When we hear their bells, we remember that faith is possible because God has left signs to point the way. May it be so!