

...BRIDGES... Number 10, 2006: Re-Connecting

on behalf of the ECCB's American Working Group and PC(USA)'s Czech Mission Network by Joyce Michael

Returning to the Czech Republic after six months of interpretation assignment in the United States was an unusual experience. In many ways, it was like coming "home" to a specific location, customary responsibilities, and cherished routines. Yet, so much had happened since John and I had left Prague on May 1st that I hardly knew how to begin to reconnect.

However, when I ventured to the ECCB's national offices a couple of days after our return, it was almost as if we had not been away. Warm greetings were accompanied by descriptions of tasks that needed attention and decisions that needed to be made. In some ways, it seemed as if nothing had changed. Yet, as I began to translate articles for the next edition of *Czech Protestant News*, it was clear that much had happened. A staff retreat in Hungary, Professor Jakub Trojan's "premier" of his controversial new book at the annual meeting of the Friends of the Protestant Theological Faculty, and the dedication of a new church building in the Southern City section of Prague were just a few of the events that simultaneously filled me with a burst of excitement and a sense of being "on the outside."

That ambiguous feeling quickly disappeared when I made my way to worship on the first Sunday in November. The sanctuary was packed, but the seats that John and I regularly occupy were waiting. The service was long, but without tedium, as the rich harmonies of *Naše Zpěvci* ("Our Singers") added an especially meditative cast to our celebration of Holy Communion. Moreover, the warmth that pervaded the whole service was particularly evident as the pastors lovingly served the final communicants, two young boys who had been unable to find a place in the last large circle that had gathered around the worship table.

After the service, I enjoyed some interesting conversations with friends whom I had not seen for months, but who easily resumed a thoughtful and personal manner of relating. For instance, as I waited with a friend for an opening in the "wall of people" that filled the entrance hallway following worship, we began to discuss the drift toward self-gratification that characterizes the religious scene in a variety of places these days. "Maybe there are fewer serious Christians in the world than we would like to think," he quizzically sighed,

just before another friend summoned me to a quiet corner to describe several exciting and saddening events that had transpired while we were away. That conversation was also full and rich, and as I left the church, with a lively Czech hymn ringing in my head, I had a strong sense of home-coming, which grew even more pronounced the next weekend.

Indeed, when Jon Chapman and Burkhard Paetzold arrived on November 11, so that Jon could begin to become acquainted with PC(USA)'s partner churches in this part of the world, my John and I were propelled into an adventure of re-connecting. A luncheon meeting with Dean Martin Prudký acquainted me with some of the exciting new programs that are emerging at the Protestant Theological Faculty and with the forms that future contacts between American thinkers and our partner seminary may take. Thought-provoking discussions with Eva Grollová and Pavel Vychopen of the ECCB's Diaconia also provided valuable up-dates on a variety of issues. Likewise, a meeting with the American Working Group explored a host of questions and possibilities in ways that promise to yield tangible results and lasting connections.

Yet, opportunities for serious conversation and amicable interaction were, by far, the most cherished feature of those days of reunion. In retrospect, it seems to me that such occasions were undergirded by the spirit of reverence, hospitality, and delight which characterized the worship service that Jon, Burkhard, and I attended at the newly-dedicated church in the Southern City. That moving event clearly demonstrated that even when we have assembled in a new place with unknown people, the art of worship is uniquely able to bring us home to the heart of love. Thus, the interactions that go on after we have moved beyond the walls of the sanctuary and have re-entered the world of everyday affairs may be distinguished by dynamics of openness and enhanced by rhythms of grace.