

...BRIDGES... Number 2, 2007: Where two or three are gathered...; prepared by Joyce Michael on behalf of the ECCB's American Working Group and the PC(USA)'s Czech Mission Network

Every January, John, the Moderator of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, and I turn our attention toward the over-arching theme that the editorial staff of the PC(USA)'s Mission Yearbook has suggested for the subsequent year. Sometimes, that theme evokes so many images that it is hard to settle on a single story; other times, ideas are slower in coming and are less directly related to the Yearbook's over-arching emphasis. However, in recent years, the proposed themes have had amazing connections with recent happenings, and our submissions to the Yearbook have come to expression with a certain amount of fervor.

That was the case again this year, when the theme for the 2008 Yearbook was both inviting and timely. Indeed, Rev. Ruml's reflections, which I translated before composing my own contribution, struck me as being unusually insightful and remarkably apt. Thus, I considered not submitting anything dealing with the text in which Jesus says, "Where two or three are gathered in my name...." However, as I began an "experimental" translation of Jakub Trojan's new book, I was reminded of the small groups of Christian dissidents who dared to meet together during the communist era, and that, in turn, led me to recall that this is the year of the thirtieth anniversary of Charter 77, whose signers included a number of the people who participated in those very groups. Thus, I wrote the following reflections to send to the Mission Yearbook team. Since I have asked those dedicated folks to print Rev. Ruml's article this year, I think that it will be acceptable for me to share my reflections with you. Perhaps they will offer you a glimmer of meaning or hope.

Professor Trojan has dedicated his provocative book, *Jesus' Story – a Challenge for Us*, "to friends from New Orientation, dead and living, with whom I entered into conversation and decision-making during the difficult period between 1958 and 1989, growing in confidence in the encouraging meaning of Jesus' life and his Gospel." This dedication alludes to the powerful impact that small groups of Christians had in Czechoslovakia, as they gathered secretly during the communist era to wrestle with penetrating questions of faith and to nurture seeds of grace and justice in an arid landscape of oppressive policies and suppressed hope.

Throughout the country, pastors and educators alike took the risk of hosting groups of political and "spiritual" dissidents who dared to look at biblical texts, theological issues, and philosophical theories without the "rose-colored glasses" that comfortable piety may invite. These groups supported their members with a rare blend of compassion and challenge; facilitated the covert preparation and distribution of type-written copies of books from the West that had been banned by communist authorities; and took up a number of difficult issues. From Brno, where a survivor of Nazi concentration camps hosted groups focused on human rights – to villages in the countryside where pastors opened their doors to people who wanted to explore and preserve a faithful way of living under the

communist regime – to a warehouse in Prague where similar gatherings were held – in all of these and many other places – small groups came together despite surveillance, the loss of licenses to preach and teach, and expulsions.

Thus, 30 years ago, a number of participants in these groups joined together to present the government of Czechoslovakia with an unprecedented challenge, as they signed a document called Charter 77, which demanded that authorities abide by their promise to uphold human rights in terms of the Helsinki Accord. As those small groups thus ventured a colossal risk together, the drive for liberation that had been growing, with quiet persistence, for a number of years was enhanced, and now, Professor Trojan and other people of faith are free to develop the insights that emerged in their small groups in ways which may give living embodiment to Trojan's assertion that "...the Christian faith is not cold ashes, but a fireplace from which a flame can burst forth once more."

PRAYER: Let us not forget people of courage, o Lord. When times are easy, may their examples prod us; when times are hard, may their perseverance encourage us; and, above all, may the wisdom that they have gleaned find clear expression, so that Jesus' story can remain a living source of hope and liberation for everyone who is searching for a new orientation. Amen.