

...BRIDGES... Number 5, 2008: "Compelling Themes"

by Joyce Michael for the ECCB's American Working Group & PC(USA)'s Czech Mission Network

In BRIDGES 3, I addressed one of the concerns raised by a faithful advocate of Czech relations, and now, the time seems right for me to keep my promise to share her second heart-felt plea: *"Please don't send so many (BRIDGES) when we're all on overload before & after Christmas.. Please find a way to hold them. I know I'd be more appreciative of your efforts."*

In my reply to that request, I apologized for the flurry of BRIDGES that arrived at the end of 2007. However, I also noted that I have promised to prepare 12 BRIDGES annually, and that events which "tempt" me to write often happen in clusters during late spring/early summer and autumn/advent months, rather than being evenly distributed throughout the year. I went on to observe that the last three BRIDGES of 2007 could not have been written sooner because they were based on events which took place in late November and December, and I added that it is always quite meaningful to be able to send Czech-inspired Christmas and New Year's greetings to people who are interested in this special place.

Then, I invited my friend (and I similarly encourage all of you) to read BRIDGES whenever you have time to enter into their content in a relaxed way, regardless of their date of arrival. Finally, I ventured the hypothesis that I would not be faithful to my task, if I were to mechanically "crank out" a new BRIDGES each month, just for the sake of saying that I had met my commitment, any more than I could accommodate my colleague's suggestion that I "just write something" when more content was needed for a recent publication. You see, writing is not a matter of mere routine for me; instead, it is an act of heart and soul. Thus, I expect, and am even grateful, that these up-dates will continue to come to expression as, and when, God's spirit brings them to life. Thank you for understanding, and celebrating this fact, as you read this edition of BRIDGES, which has been a very long time in coming to expression!

About this time last year, I attended a day-long seminar on mission sponsored by the Central European Centre for Mission Studies, which is housed at the church building where the ECCB's Kobylysy congregation meets. I was impressed by the contextual focus of that special gathering whose leaders were committed to articulating an understanding of mission that would take the cultural heritage and political background of Central European countries into account. The idea of evangelizing merely for the sake of evangelizing was dismissed in favor of an approach which would begin by reaching out to people at their points of need. The seminar's main speakers theorized that once people have been cared for by present-day followers of Christ, they will be receptive to the gospel message. They emphasized stressed that once folks have seen God's love in action and felt Christ's presence in "real time," they are apt to recognize and embrace the transforming power of the Christian message.

I was encouraged by this humane way of introducing people to the liberating power of Christ's word and example. However, on other occasions, the practice of helping hurting people in order to interest them in the Christian faith has made me rather uncomfortable. The tacit expectation that people who have been cared for in the name of Christ will become Christian seems to run contrary to the approach which affirms our responsibility to reach out to people in need just because they are human beings created by God, apart from any other "goal" on the part of caregivers vis-à-vis the recipients of their services.

As I reflect on the unconditional nature of God's love, I cannot help but recall the stress that the ECCB's Diaconia consistently places on providing care for the sake of their clients, without presuming that those folks will necessarily become Christians. Insofar as the assistance extended by the DECCB is distinguished by an essential quality of unconditionality, it may provide an apt model of God's unfailing love for us wayward human beings. Such an approach to searching people assuredly has a unique potential to acquaint them with a deeper pattern of relating than many of the routines that typically characterize the human sphere evince.

Interestingly enough, the Diaconia is currently taking a close look at what sets it apart from other social service centers because a new law has raised standards of quality across the board. Not all of the Diaconia's workers or clients are Christians, but Eva Grollová makes a telling observation when she says: "What lies under each conception (of service) is important..." Thus, it really matters that "for some of us, sensitivity to the individuality of human beings stems from Christian values..." Although Eva adds that "we have not been able to enumerate where the borders are that guard Christian values in diaconal work," I will be presumptuous enough to say that an unconditional approach to caring for individual human beings may graciously acquaint non-Christian workers and clients alike with the essential difference that distinguishes the work of the Diaconia. It may very well be this sort of love that guards Christian values, and makes their life-enhancing operation real in the lives of actual people. Praise be to God.