

A Question of Partnership

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(except where noted)

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Part V - "I was a stranger and you welcomed me"

JANSKÉ LÁZNĚ, CZECH REPUBLIC, Thursday, October 23rd, 2008 – The sun comes up early in this spa town in the Krkonoše Mountains. Before burning off at midday, a wispy fog hangs low in the valley that breaks at the foot of the road leading up to *Sole Fida*, the ECCB retreat house tucked into the Krkonoše (pronounced *kirrrrk-uh-nosheh*) foothills. The fall foliage colors are still striking; the chill in the air hints at the coming winter.

PARTNERSHIP CONFERENCE '08 reassembled here in ski country on Monday evening. We've spent the past two days reviewing our collective experiences in Prague and visiting with our potential partners.



View from Sole Fida's front yard

And we've relaxed together.

You can't visit this part of the Czech Republic without venturing into Krkonošský Národní Park (Krkonoše National Park) for a peaceful hike beside a waterfall. Nor should you deny yourself a visit to one of the oldest glass factories in the world or a little souvenir shopping in any of the nearby villages.

But now, on this final afternoon of our conference, we've packed up the minibus for the three-hour trip back to Prague; it's a chance to nap or reflect.

When we arrived in the Czech Republic nine days ago, all we had in common with our fellow conferees were our membership in the Body of Christ, the blessings of our individual Sessions to explore partnership and the Conference preview materials. During our first week together – but most

especially over the course of the weekend and these last few days of additional mutual discovery - we Americans and Czechs have come to realize just how much alike we are.

Sure, there are cultural differences. Few Americans breakfast on the Czech staples of yogurt and sliced cold cuts and cheese, or have their "big meal" of the day at lunch. We Presbyterians rarely conduct meetings without a gurgling pot of coffee (ask for coffee and the Czechs will most likely serve you espresso; ask for something lighter and it will generally be Nescafé instant crystals). Hospitality is a source of pride with the Czechs; lovingly admire an item in a Czech's home and more often than not they will wish to gift you the item.

During group discussions, we Americans tended to be quicker to respond to discussion points and questions while the Czechs tended to be more restrained, mulling their responses before speaking (a bad habit, they explained, a holdover from their days living under the thumb of the Nazis and Communists.)

On the flip side, we conferees drew closer together through humor. Our final Tuesday evening here at Sole Fida was "American Culture Night." Each PC(USA) team took great pleasure in describing their hometown highlights through pictures, local dress and the dissemination of trinkets and souvenirs. The

Sewickley team relished the group's glee when they passed out lapel pins shaped like miniature Heinz Ketchup bottles and the company's 57 Varieties pickle logo.

Naturally, *everybody's* hometown was **better than** everyone else's (this NY Mets fan loved the embroidered UGA Bulldog lapel stick-on, but it got a little interesting when one of the Georgia delegation snapped on her Atlanta Braves cap.)

When the Nebraska contingent trotted out their bright red "I'M A BOLIEVER" T-shirts and crooned their homespun ballad in honor of Cornhusker football coach Bo Pelini, the fans of the Kansas Jayhawks, Maryland Terrapins, North Carolina Tar Heels and Georgia Bulldogs playfully voiced their differing opinions, much to the Czech's delight.



**The "Cornhusker Contingent"
singing the praises of Coach Bo Pelini**

Where we and the Czechs proved most alike is in our mutual determination *not to limit* the Truth of God. This became most evident, during discussions about the mechanics of partnership; the subject sparked the conference's most animated dialogue.

Over their seven year relationship, First Annapolis and Letohrad have developed a written agreement – though not legal or wholly binding – which better-serves their efforts to further spiritual awareness through somewhat non-traditional means. Each congregation developed a committee to oversee the partnership and any travel projects between the two. Because of the length of their association, both congregations have been able to mutually-develop a partial underwriting program; travel lists are now in place, helping keep the partnership "objective" in the face of deepening friendships.

Yet, while there was much to praise First Annapolis and Letohrad for developing this new way of expanding religious horizons, there was a lingering sense among those of us still new to the partnership concept – especially the Czechs – that there was a built-in element of "no" in the mix.

Bill Hathaway quickly jumped in to address – and allay - these fears.

"The key is open dialogue among equals."

He noted, "Partnerships are based upon prayer, laughter and regular communication."

To avoid misunderstandings, and their inherent hurt feelings, the First Annapolis-Letohrad team advised the conferees to be clear, concise and straight forward in working out their partnership arrangements.

"Avoid nuances," urged Hathaway, "that could be lost in translation between the Czech and English languages – especially with 'hot-button' items such as financial underwriting or scholarships."

In the end, no hard and fast rules exist for creating a partnership.

"There is no one way to live within a partnership," Hathaway said, adding that the partnership agreement in place for First Annapolis and Letohrad is a format that works for them.

"Hopefully, it can serve as a guidepost for those who wish to follow along on the trail."

