

A Question of Partnership
Text and Photos by Jim Nedelka
(except where noted)
Special to the Presbyterian News Service

Part IV - "I Do...I Don't...I Don't Know"

My focus returns to the worship service in Hvozdnice as the congregation begins rising for the closing prayer and benediction (it is ECCB custom for the congregation to stand while praying and sit while singing).

At service's end, Vendula excuses herself from Fellowship Hour. A village family has asked her to officiate at a private funeral at the local cemetery just up the road; the Thanksgiving Sunday meal with her congregation will have to wait for a half-hour or so.

In the interlude, Holly and I share family and "New York" pictures with the congregation; we meet those members we hadn't met the previous day.

As a way of welcome, the congregation had arranged a church outing in Národní Přírodní Památká (Pamatka National Preserve), hiking along one of the well-marked trails that border the Sázavou River. The scenery was lovely, the company and conversations fun, but after six miles over hill and dale, Holly and I are glad today's most strenuous planned activity will be that of lifting fork to mouth.

Vendula returns and we all head upstairs to the manse, where her kitchen table is transformed into a banquet table. The traditional Czech meal of polévka (soup), vepřova pečeně (roast pork loin) with knedlíčky (potato dumplings) and zely (sweet-and-sour cabbage with caraway seeds) is the best pot luck church lunch I've ever had.



Holly Nedelka (second from left) sharing pictures with some of the Husův Dům congregants



Along the trail

There is much laughter and breezy small talk in Czech and/or English and/or German and sometimes all three languages in the same sentence. The Czechs want to know about our family, our jobs, New York City, the upcoming US elections and commiserate about the assorted aches, pains and stiffness we have from yesterday's hike, in muscles we didn't remember having nor haven't used since we can't remember when.

Soon it is time for coffee, tea, a selection of amazing pastries and the congregation's thoughts regarding the possible partnership between Husův Dům, Hvozdnice, CZ, and Jan Hus Presbyterian Church, New York, NY.

For Holly and me, we are ready for our Conference assignment during this weekend visit: "to listen."

Vendula speaks for her congregation, stating publicly that a partnership will work only as a "peer" relationship; the Czech's recent history suggests nothing less.

In 1990, when Czechoslovakia emerged from behind the Iron Curtain as a free country, it was quickly apparent to both the country's leadership that life would be more comfortable for both the Czech and Slovak

cultures if this newly-free nation split into separate nations. On January 1st, 1993, this goal was achieved when Slovakia and the Czech Republic became a reality; both countries were labeled as “emerging nations”

Today, the Czech Republic is a “peer nation,” having shed its “emerging” tag in record time; in 2009 they will be seated as President of the European Union.

Sitting together with our new Czech friends in Hvozdnice, drinking our coffee and drinking-in their view points, it is clear to all: we stand on the threshold of a *new concept in relationship* between groups of “church people” from two “developed nations.”

Husův Dům’s pastor continues: her congregation has wrestled with the same questions about the nature of a potential partnership that Holly and I have discussed since we signed on for this conference, especially “will our Sessions be able to say ‘I do?’”



The “Kitchen Cabinet” of Husův Dům, Hvozdnice, CZ

Then Vendula smiles: the parishioners around this kitchen table are the leadership of her church. They have made the congregational decision to pursue a partnership in whatever shape, whatever form it develops. They fully understand our “messenger” role – charged by the Session only to listen, learn and report back.

Husův Dům lights our path by suggesting an easy starting point beyond e-mail and telephone communications: a cultural exchange visit during September 2009. Their hope is that several members/congregants from New York will be able to visit Hvozdnice to further advance this burgeoning friendship. Then, in 2010, a group from Hvozdnice would visit New York. Vendula suggests that part of the Czech delegation might include one of her accomplishments: the *Husův Dům Singers*. Though under the baton of the church’s Music Director, Veronika Kopecká, most of the dozen or so singers come from the village but are not members of the parish...yet.

Vendula explains that their timeline is drawn for a practical reason: the difficulties inherent in travelling with very young children. She and her husband, Pavel Kalus, are the proud parents of son Jan, who turns 4 shortly before Christmas. One of the Husův Dům Singers is pregnant, as is their Music Director, who is due in February. With two daughters - Klara, age 5, and Barbara, age 4 – Veronika and her husband, Ondrej Kopečý, an anesthesiologist, are going to have their hands full.

Holly suggests that the month of August might work better since that is a more traditional vacation period in the States. The Czechs warm to the idea and there is further conversation about the particulars that will work better for the assembled majority.

We promise to be faithful messengers.

Our lunch concludes with a final prayer, then it is smiles all around as we pose for photos, exchange e-mail addresses and plans for spending the rest of this lovely afternoon in the Czech countryside.

