

A Question of Partnership
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(except where noted)
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Part VI - No Longer Strangers on the Bus

As our mini-bus winds through the countryside en route to Prague, it strikes me that ECCB – PC(USA) PARTNERSHIP CONFERENCE '08 has been a living example of the concept of “Six Degrees of Separation.” First



set forth by Frigyes Karinthy in his 1929 short story *Láncszemek (Chains)*, the theory holds that, despite great physical distances between our planet's individuals, the growing density of human networks makes the actual social distance far smaller (ironically, the first degree is Karinthy himself, a Hungarian born during the time when the Czech Republic was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire).

In *Chains*, the characters believe that any two individuals can be connected through - at most - five acquaintances:

A fascinating game grew out of this discussion. One of us suggested performing the following experiment to prove that the population of the Earth is closer together now than they have ever been before.

We should select any person from the 6.7 billion inhabitants of the Earth—anyone, anywhere at all. He bet us that, using no more than five individuals, one of whom is a personal acquaintance, he could contact the selected individual using nothing except the network of personal acquaintances.

For Holly and me, our journey to a Czech partnership has also been highly personal. Our network of friendships – our circles if you will - have expanded forward with our new acquaintances and friendships from both sides of the Atlantic. Our expanded circles also reach backward.

We have an expanded circle around October 13th, the day this conference began: it would have been Grandpa Nedelka's 106th birthday. This journey helped us draw a wider circle around June 5th, another Czech Holiday, which is Vendula and Pavel's wedding day...and was also my grandparents' wedding day. On this journey to partnership, Holly and I joined Vendula, Paul and Jan on a car trip which enabled me to go home to a place I've never been before: my Grandfather's hometown, Světlá nad Sázavou. Like kids on a Treasure Hunt, Vendula and Pavel eagerly asked around for information. One old woman we met (affectionately, a *Baba*) lived down the street from where my Grandfather's cousins had lived; we drove her home. A neighbor up the street told us that my relatives had moved years ago; their in-home bake shop is now a barber shop!

Our circle also encompasses the year 1939, the history of Jan Hus Church, New York and the genesis of the concept behind our conference – *partnership*.

This circle – this degree of separation if you will - is personified by 81-year old Alena Zikmundová by way of her father, the noted Czech theology professor, Josef Lukl Hromadka.

In 1939, with the Nazis tightening their grip on Czechoslovakia, Alena's father was labeled an “undesirable.” Only the friendship and influence of the wife of a local constable kept Hromadka's name from rising up quickly on a list of those to be arrested; the family escaped to America.

Prior to the sanctuary of a teaching position at Princeton Theological Seminary, the Hromadkas spent their first nights in the United States in New York City...at Jan Hus Church's Neighborhood House!

Alena's spirit is the candle in the window for those of us trying to frame the context of the partnership discussion within our home churches. Returning home after the turmoil of WWII cut short her theology degree track, Alena's degree track was waylaid a second time by the Communist rule of her homeland. When her country's freedom re-opened opportunities in education, she was encouraged to resume her dream. In 2005, her degrees finally completed, Alena Zikmundová was ordained by ECCB.

PARTNERSHIP CONFERENCE '08 underscored the 21st century reality that our world truly is a global village. If St. Paul were crafting Epistles today, he'd certainly be utilizing Satellite telephones, television, podcasts, e-mail, Skype, video conferencing, *FaceBook*, *MySpace*, *Twitter* and every other community-building platform to connect with people half-way up the block or half-way around the world.

In today's increasingly secular world - the Czech Republic being one of the most secular - the ECCB admittedly faces an uphill climb in their efforts to spread God's message. Their most recent findings show they must split the minority of Christians who are not Roman Catholic with the other Protestant denominations; they estimate their 150,000 members to be approximately 1% of this minority.

Yet, the ECCB is strong of faith and deep in commitment. By being in dialogue - and sharing concepts - with other Christians around the world, the ECCB leadership seeks to learn and, perhaps, teach. With 90 years of shared communion, the ECCB's seeking to expand partnerships within the PC(USA) is natural and logical.

For the PC(USA) - one of the many mainline Protestant denominations dealing with an eroding membership base and issues of how to spread God's message of love in this increasingly secular society - it seems logical to till the groundwork of partnership begun by First Annapolis and Letohrad as amplified during PARTNERSHIP CONFERENCE '08.

For Holly and me, the answer to the question of partnership is a no-brainer: *any* concept that can strengthen one's faith in God, one's church, one's denomination, one's world is a concept worth pursuing.

With God's help, perhaps the potential partnerships established during PARTNERSHIP CONFERENCE '08 will come to fruition. Perhaps American counterparts will be identified for those ECCB congregations in Polička, Vsetín, Orlová, Předhradí, Floridy and Náchod-Šonov who wish to be paired.

For those considering walking the trail of partnership, these concluding thoughts from Alena Zikmundová should serve as sage advice:

- ✦ Be open to people around you
- ✦ Work where you're needed
- ✦ Think more about what the other person needs
- ✦ If things don't go the way you plan, it's God's plan
- ✦ Thank God!



J.L. Hromadka

Alena Zikmundová

Hromadka Photo:

Protestant Theological Faculty, Charles University

For information about The First Annapolis, MD-Letohrad partnership, e-mail BETTY MCGINNIS at cobe@comcast.net. Click on their website www.czechpartner.org to see images from PARTNERSHIP CONFERENCE '08. For an additional perspective, contact the REV. JODY FILIPI at jody@czechconnections.org. When e-mailing, please type "ECCB Church Partnership Information" in the subject line.

Last year, ELDER JIM NEDELKA wrote about the controversy surrounding laws restricting the rights of immigrants in Hazleton, PA. He, along with his wife, ELDER HOLLY NEDELKA, who directs family programs at four New York churches, including Jan Hus, are members at New York's West-Park Presbyterian Church.