

...BRIDGES... Number 1, 2009: "Introducing Předhradí!"

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

There were seven PC(USA) groups, which participated in a partnership conference that was held in the Czech Republic in October 2008. However, thirteen ECCB congregations expressed interest in exploring the possibility of partnership. Thus, the weekend following the conference, I visited one of the ECCB congregations, which had not been linked with a PC(USA) congregation, so that I could become an informed advocate for that church in its quest for partnership. In this BRIDGES, I would like to introduce you to my new friends in the village of Předhradí.

On October 25, 2008, I boarded a train bound for a station located close to the village of Předhradí, where Rev. Helena Junová's husband was waiting with a car. Before very many minutes had elapsed, we arrived at a long, narrow structure adorned with inscriptions, which revealed that it is a church building. Above its door, I read the Czech words, which I often translate with the phrase, "Covet truth for everyone." The shape of a chalice to the right of the door bore words which mean: "The fulfillment of the law is love," and lettering to the left of the door identified the church as being a "Congregation of Czech Brethren Protestants" whose key dates include: **1863**, when a Protestant school was begun in a smaller building located left of the church, which now houses the manse; **1895**, when the present church was built to house the thriving school; and **1966**, when the former school, which closed in 1963, became home to ECCB folks who live in five area communities.

As I was greeted by Rev. Junová, her children, and their enthusiastic dog, I knew that I was in the midst of exceptional hospitality and grace. This intuition was further confirmed by the gentle background music that was provided by the pastor's husband, who quietly strummed a guitar as we began to get acquainted.

While it was still daylight, Rev. Junová took me next door to see the church building where she had spent a considerable amount of time that day, working to remove a pervasive coating of dust that had been left behind by extensive electrical repairs, which had been necessitated by a water leak. Since most of her members are too elderly to help with building upkeep, she and her family often double as janitors.

Rev. Junová also showed me an extensive kitchen area, and an empty room where she hopes that shower and toilet facilities can be installed. The dream underlying her desire for that to happen was revealed when she showed me a "garden area" that lies between the church and the parsonage. "I would like to hold an English camp here!" she explained. She went on to say that such a camp would be one way that a partnership could help her congregation establish a connection with unchurched residents of the village. She believes that teachers from

America could attract students who are not part of the congregation. "Everything the teachers would need would be right here at the church," she added. As she spoke, I recalled that during the conference, it had been stressed that partnerships should not be pastor-driven. However, in light of Rev. Junová's sincere enthusiasm, I simply told her that I would share her vision with the team in the United States.

When we returned to the parsonage, the pastoral family and I were joined by several local folks who had come to consider the possibility of partnership. I especially remember a young mother with a tiny baby, a couple of middle-aged women, a pair of teenagers, and a man who lives in the village, but is not typically involved with the church.

After we had sung some favorite Czech choruses, I was asked to explain why I had come to Předhradí. I stressed that I was there to listen and learn, so that I would be able to describe the congregation and the village in a lively and personal way to the folks in the United States who are responsible for finding partners. After that, questions were asked, and conversation ensued.

The group agreed that a partnership would have the potential to bring a spark of new life to the congregation and the village by enabling its people to have a direct connection with the wider world. They also decided that it would be desirable for the PC(USA) congregation involved in the partnership to have Czech roots or at least, to have some members with a Czech background. They also concurred that specific options should arise out of conversation between the two partners.

The "official" part of the evening ended with prayer and warm farewells. However, after an informal meal, which began with a lovely hymn, Rev. Junová took me aside, and described what it is like to be the pastor of a village church. As she spoke, I sensed that the numerous and diverse needs of the congregation's aging membership sometimes leave Rev. Junová feeling rather overwhelmed. Nevertheless, she has not lost her sense of spirit and her commitment to helping inaugurate a new day for her congregation. Thus, I will dare to hope that an enriching partnership between Předhradí and a PC(USA) congregation is just waiting to be born!