

**Bridges 2008**

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## **Bridges - Number 1, 2008: "Crossing Cultures"**

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

Please consider this condensed version of the devotions that I presented at the January meeting of the American Working Group to be your personal invitation to take part in the October Partnership Conference ([www.czechpartner.org](http://www.czechpartner.org)) at which representatives from twelve PC(USA) congregations will come to the Czech Republic to explore the possibility of forming an on-going relationship with an ECCB congregation.

It may be unrealistic to expect that we and our visitors from the USA will fulfill all aspects of the grand invitation to love that is extended in I Corinthians 13 when we get together later this year. Of course, no one will intend to be jealous or boastful, arrogant or rude. Everyone will want to be patient and kind, understanding and empathetic. We will all seek to be oriented in ways that will reflect and deepen the possibilities of trust, hope, and forbearance. However, I have observed cross-cultural interactions of various sorts for a number of years. Thus, I will not be surprised if some of us are so immersed in our own cultural experiences that we will have a hard time appreciating how different some aspects of life are for our conversation partners. There may be some expressions of "benevolent arrogance" as we try to share the goodness of our own cultural legacies without realizing that a different approach to the same need may work just as well. There may be some jealousy as some participants manifest attributes that others of us covet. But I am speaking in abstractions – so a story from real life may be in order now.

Each year, our landlady initiates the some discussion on Christmas Eve, as she tries to make sense of the American tradition of Santa Claus. To her, that figure appears to be the epitome of the excesses of western consumerism. Thus, although John annually reminds her of the connection between Santa Claus and Saint Nicholas, she persists in questioning this American convention. I do not know if I could ever help her imagine that taken at his very best, Santa Claus may be a tangible expression of the prospect that "hearts are made kind at Christmas," as one of my father's Christmas prayers eloquently put it. I do not know if I could ever help my landlady see that Santa Claus can show us a gentle and gracious alternative to the examples of violence, inequity, and self-concern that seem to be flourishing in so many American communities.

Yet, from my perspective, associating the baby Jesus so closely with the gifts that we exchange on Christmas Eve still feels rather foreign. Theologically, it makes a great deal of sense to

thank the baby Jesus for bringing us the gifts of peace, love, joy, and hope. And in a larger sense, I concur that "All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above." Thus, I am somewhat prepared for the idea that the baby Jesus bestows the gifts of life. But when my landlady opens her yearly-tram pass, raises her eyes toward the ceiling, and enthusiastically says, "Thank you, Little Jesus," I feel as if I am part of a tradition that many American Christians would not quite understand. Thus, forming international relationships may not be an instant or effortless process, even when complicated issues of war and peace are not involved. As a favorite aphorism reminds us, "we cannot fly into flying."

Yet, we can move ahead with hope if we recall Paul's promise that "now, we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now we know in part; then, we shall understand fully, even as we have been fully understood." „Now“ could be any time at all, but „then“ sounds as if it entails an entirely different time and sphere. And yet, there may be moments when "then" breaks through even now. My landlady may not quite understand Santa Claus and I may not quite get the gift-bearing Jesus. But she surely knows how to make John and me feel part of her family on the most intimate night of the year. She surely is able to show me what my father meant when he spoke of "hearts made kind at Christmas." She surely knows how to extend the gift of love.

Relating in love is always fragmentary and partial in our very human world, and the road to building cross-cultural relationships is never easy, but an important clue about a gracious way to embrace the international exchanges that we will experience this year may be well-voiced in the beloved prayer-song which declares: "Day by Day, Day by Day, O dear Lord, three things I pray: To see thee more clearly; To love thee more dearly, To follow thee more nearly, day by day." May this not only be our way of embracing Jesus' presence. May it also be our way of embracing our international neighbors. May we always seek to see more clearly, to love more dearly, and together, to follow Christ more nearly, day by day. Amen.

## ...BRIDGES... Number 2, 2008: "CONNECTING"

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

Recently, I received an e-mail in which one of you wrote: "It sounds like some exciting things are happening." And so they are! In addition to preparations to host the PW's Global Exchange in September, a Partnership Conference in October, and a seminar for ECCB and PC(USA) pastors in 2009, I received three e-mails in one day, which revealed new interest and alerted me to yet other ways to build relationships between PC(USA) and ECCB congregations, groups, and individuals. Thus, if, according to our Czech partners, this is "the American year," 2009 may also have a strong component of PC(USA)/ECCB connections, reflective of a new level of relationship and commitment. It is also an exciting time because of wonderful e-mails that describe various Czech-related activities in which various PC(USA) congregations are already involved. I want to share some of these with you in this, and future, BRIDGES, so that these updates really can become the two-way path of communication that I originally envisioned.

"...Our annual Moravian Love Feast on Dec. 30, 2007 will have the added attraction of a mission report . . . on the historical background of the ECCB and how the PC(USA) is related to it in theology, governance, and mission ties. Members of Memorial Park PC (he's a "birth-rite Moravian" whose uncle currently is a bishop in that church) attended our service last year. Recently, she called to tell me that his cousin and wife who live in Bethlehem, PA, make all of the beeswax candles used by Moravians all over the country for their Love Feasts. The local couple has offered to give us authentic Moravian beeswax candles, onto which they will individually paste red, fireproof paper fringes. . . . Isn't that a gracious gift?"

Wilberta Pickett, Fox Chapel PC, Pittsburgh

"Members of Covenant Presbyterian Church, Columbus, Ohio, who visited the Czech Republic last July and October presented programs about their visits at two Sunday morning "Adult Forums." The first program had members telling about their travels, showing slides, and recalling their sense of awe at so much history, spanning such a long period of time, and such beautiful old buildings.

We described meeting for dinner with Czech friends, including Jan Dus and mission volunteer, Kati Salmons, from Polička. They talked about their work and showed slides of English classes that are providing church activities for unchurched people in their area.

We also told of visiting the Church of Milič z Kroměříže in Prague's Southern City district and of meeting with the pastor there.

This attractive new church building, which offered a strong contrast to the huge churches we had been seeing, is striving to introduce the residents of a nearby shelter for homeless families and blocks of high-rise apartments to the presence of God and the love of Christ.

The second program was given by two brothers, Kyle and Jon Davis, who shared an excellent slide show, while speaking about an international ECCB youth conference that they attended in 2007. They spoke of enjoying the city of Prague, the conference, the people they got to know, and hiking the mountainous terrain of eastern Bohemia where that camp is held. Both of the presentations enabled those who attended these Forums to have greater knowledge of, and appreciation for, what God is doing in the Czech Republic."

Helen Lowry, Covenant PC, Columbus

Relatedly, another member of Covenant PC writes: "I especially enjoyed visiting the church and hearing about its mission from the pastor. While I already knew how important it is to find out what people need and will actually use, his talk about the Roma people really made an impression on me. From now on, I will try to apply that principle before 'helping' someone by giving them what I think they need.

Janet Meunch, Covenant PC, Columbus

This is just the beginning of examples of practicing Czech traditions, sharing faith journeys, and being transformed that I want to offer you. May they encourage and inspire you to think of your own very best – and most fitting – ways of developing and fostering your Czech connections! Joyce M.

### **...BRIDGES... Number 3, 2008: "Technological Conundrums"**

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

During a recent visit by a three-member planning team that came to the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Ukraine to discuss the Presbyterian Women's up-coming Global Exchange, I had some "close encounters" with technological advances that I do not often experience. For instance, I had occasion to use a borrowed mobile phone for a Czech Mission Network conference call that took place while we were on the road, and I was fascinated by the little hand-held devices that my traveling companions used to receive and send e-mail while traveling on the train. Since it occurs to me that I may not be the only one who does quite not know what to make of such wonders of human ingenuity, I want to begin this up-date by sharing a "constructive criticism" regarding the intricacies of e-mail that I received last winter.

A great supporter of Czech connections has given me permission to share the following concern, which she expressed with a certain flair: "...I fail to see why Bridges always says it's from Jan Dus. You have an e-mail address. Why not use it? Blows my mind. Jan sends his own e-mail messages."

Since I am aware that other readers have had the same question over the years, I want to take this opportunity to clear up this technological mystery. Simply put, I cannot use my own e-mail address for BRIDGES because I do not send these up-dates myself. I forward completed BRIDGES to Jan's computer, and he distributes them, using the list of e-mail addresses that he keeps up-to-date. This arrangement was established by the American Working Group in 2002 when it gave me permission to write BRIDGES. Since I do not know how to send messages to 160+ people at one time, I am grateful to Jan for helping out in this way. Please be assured that I do not use Jan's name for any messages that I send from my own computer. I am honored to invite you to express appreciation to Jan for enabling BRIDGES to reach you in such an efficient way.

Unfortunately, the by-products of technological advances cannot always be addressed so easily, nor are they always as benign in their impact on our planet and our lives. Thus, I want to devote the rest of this BRIDGES to a paper on Climate Change that Dr. Jiří Nečas wrote on behalf of the ECCB in response to a request from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

Dr. Nečas declares: "Climate change is indisputably one of the most serious of the current environmental problems. In addition, it is highly-politicized, especially in the Czech Republic where this question has a unique "flavor," resulting from President Klaus' positions. He not only denies any human

influence on climate change; he has also adopted a negative attitude toward the possibility of searching for ways to respond to climate change." After observing that "an awareness of our responsibility for the environment is growing within the ECCB," Dr. Nečas admits: "It is not easy for the members of the ECCB to objectively assess how they are doing.... Therefore, I would like to supplement this report with the outcome of...a public opinion poll that...had to do with practical ecological behavior."

The analyst of that poll states that "Christians can be an example for the entire society," before adding that "...this is a group of residents that is not so dependent on material values and surpasses the prevailing norm in adopting a more responsible approach to life.... In particular, the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren may boast of especially good results. Its members use the most environmentally-friendly laundry detergent. They regularly use public transportation, limiting travel in private cars to the most essential minimum, and they separate their trash with care. In some of its manses, we even observed a complete set of waste bins for the separated trash of parishioners who do not have this option at home. Church members are periodically informed about this service in congregational letters that are printed on entirely recycled paper, and individual congregations are participating in programs like "green energy." They are installing solar panels on their properties, and are devoting considerable effort to insulating their buildings. Sunday school classes and confirmation studies, which are focused on love and respect for the whole of creation, are also encouraging."

May this affirmation of the possibility that "Christian values" really can make a difference in our stewardship of creation inspire you to celebrate and intensify your own conservational activities during this month when "Earth Day" is typically celebrated in the United States.

## ...BRIDGES... Number 4, 2008: Part 1: "Telling the Stories"

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

As 2007 turned toward 2008, I had a "brain storm." I could ask people who had been writing to me about Czech-inspired activities in their local congregations to contribute short paragraphs for a special issue of BRIDGES. That invitation met with such enthusiastic replies that I decided to include two of the full-page articles that I had received in the next *Czech Mission Network News*. Yet, I now have too much material for the *News*, so I want to share those related articles with you in this two-part BRIDGES. The first of these was written by Nancy Jane Edelman who went above and beyond the call of duty to send this article by post when her attempts to communicate with me by e-mail were unsuccessful. I am sure that you will join me in thanking her for persevering in her effort to share her enthusiasm and commitment with us.

In the fall of 2007, four Sunday School sessions at Fox Chapel Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh were focused on mission. I led the one that was devoted to the work of the Diaconia of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren because my husband and I have made four trips to the Czech Republic and have taken members of our congregation on two of them. As conversation starters, we had a display of crafts and other memorabilia on a long table, and Jeanne Christy and Louise Lytle assembled a collection of photos that had been taken during our visits. However, the morning really began after Harry "Bud" Edelman opened the session with prayer, and several participants in various events reported on different aspects of our Czech experience.

For example, Louise Lytle told of our visit to a center for disabled persons in Plzeň, where the total budget for seven or eight people, supplies, and maintenance was less than we would pay one person. The older children there gave a musical performance. A small boy with cerebral palsy attached himself to Bud Edelman for the entire time, holding his hand and saying, "man, man, man," his only English word.

Wilma and Mike Nemeč spoke of the workshop for disabled people in Soběslav where candles, wooden toys, painted pottery, and silk scarves were being made. One young man, unable to do anything except cut out the price tags, was still able to indicate that Wilma needed a chair when he saw her on crutches. Classes for small children are also held there, and the rooms have been beautifully painted with fanciful animals by a local minister.

John and Wilberta Pickett told about our group's participation in worship with the members of the Church of Jacob's Ladder. Jay Collins, the Fox Chapel pastor who was with us, helped serve communion, and Verne Koch and I read scripture. The songbooks had words in English, Italian, French, German, and Czech. We sang the hymns together, but in our own languages. The congregation had a lovely reception for our group following worship.

Susan Kendall told of our visit to a home for the elderly in Písek. Our group had taken puzzles, bingo games, yarn, and other crafts for them. We had lunch with the staff, and were entertained by a small chorus accompanied on the organ by an elderly resident. The chorus was surprised to learn that we knew the music of Antonín Dvořák, and were even more surprised when we recognized "When the Saints Go Marchin' In." On our second visit, the organist – who had entered the home not speaking – had increased the group to sixteen, had created a song songbook for them, and was communicating with everyone. An elderly lady who was bedfast had crocheted a doily and had it framed for each of us.

Verne and Mary Ann Koch told of our first visit to what our group calls the "Yellow House." That looked like a dilapidated building which we would have torn down. However, it was to become a sheltered workshop, a tea room with crafts for sale, and a dorm for people who live too far away to commute. We were shown that one wall of a planned addition would be made up of the old city wall. On later visits, proud local people showed us around the finished house, and we were proud too. Most of the money donated by Fox Chapel Presbyterian Church has been given to the "Yellow House."

I spoke between each presentation, adding little stories and tying the entire program together. I provided background information about several of the Diaconia's personnel, the difficulties posed by the primarily atheistic government, the make-up of the diaconal centers' local boards, our lunch with the mayor of Soběslav, and so forth. Then, Charlie Haeussner – who had recently visited the Diaconia's national offices – gave a PowerPoint presentation on the history of the Reformed Church in the Czech Republic, and tied its mission to the history of our own Presbyterian Church (USA). It was a great occasion for bringing our Czech connections to life for people who have not yet had an opportunity to go to the Czech Republic.

---by Nancy Jane Edelman

## BRIDGES... Number 4, 2008: Part 2: "Telling the Stories..."

Please enjoy – and take to heart the inviting challenges that are inherent in – Charles Haeussner's lively account of the important connections which can be made when we travel and as we learn. ☺, Joyce

In September 2007, my wife and I, and two other friends from our Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, visited Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. Several years before our congregation, the Fox Chapel Presbyterian Church, had sent a mission group to Prague to begin a relationship with the ECCB and its Diaconia. Although our trip in 2007 was scheduled as a holiday, I could not pass up the opportunity to meet with people from those organizations and to give an updated report to our congregation upon our return home.

I had met John and Joyce Michael when they visited our church a few years ago and felt confident contacting them by e-mail. Through their efforts, we were able to meet with leaders of the ECCB and its Diaconia, as well as to attend several events, including a street fair that featured several non-profit social service centers. As a result of meeting with local people, walking the streets of Prague, visiting historic sites, and reading more about the Czech Reformation, I came away with a new appreciation for the history of Protestantism and the reformed tradition. The Protestant Reformation had its origins in Prague; persevered throughout the Counter-Reformation, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, World Wars I and II, and Communism; and finally emerged as a vital agent of service in the new Czech Republic. I realized that there was an under-appreciated story here that needed to be told to my friends at home.

My wife and I are also active in a newly-formed Network with the Presbyterian Churches in Iraq, and I kept comparing the history of the Czech Republic with current events in Iraq. Christians there are being forced to renounce their faith, close their churches, flee their homes and country, or face persecution and even death. These are some of the same things that Protestant reformers in Bohemia and Moravia had to endure across the centuries. However, the ECCB emerged, and the Diaconia was re-created to help those who need their services. The Protestant community of the Czech Republic can be a guide, hope, and role model for Iraqi Christians who are currently struggling against radical Islam.

Wherever we go and whatever we learn, we cannot keep it to ourselves. God has blessed us with opportunities to travel, learn, and share with others. Soon after we returned to Pittsburgh, Carol and I started a MISSION:POSSIBLE Sunday School Adult Education Class in which we spent one week discussing the ECCB and the

Diaconia. During that session, members of the Czech mission group who had traveled to Prague several years ago reflected on various locations that they had visited. We also shared photographs, a PowerPoint presentation, a display table, and handicrafts. Faces of the people and children in various centers, current church leaders and mission workers in Prague, and the well-attended street fair brought the ministry of the ECCB and the Diaconia to life. We talked of the PC(USA)'s Czech Mission Network and distributed copies of its newsletter and BRIDGES.

In subsequent weeks, there were presentations on other hands-on missions with which our church is directly involved, including the Network for Presbyterian Churches in Iraq, medical mission trips to Haiti, and work trips to New Orleans to help the people who were affected by Hurricane Katrina rebuild their homes.

For the past five years, our Fox Chapel Presbyterian Church has celebrated a Moravian Love Feast on the last Sunday of the year. This gives us a wonderful chance to recall the reformed tradition that began with Jan Hus and the Protestant reformers in the Czech lands. We sing Bohemian and Moravian hymns; read passages of scripture about love; share a common meal of sweet buns, coffee, and hot chocolate; and talk of the *agape* love that was shared by Christians in the time of the Apostles, and by Moravians as they formed their community in Herrnhut, Germany and began a vital missionary movement. Using a PowerPoint presentation, I was able to illustrate this history, to describe the challenges faced by Czech Protestants, and to bring everyone up-to-date on the current life of the ECCB and its Diaconia. I used slides from Presbyterian churches in Iraq to compare the story of Czech Protestants with the present-day struggles of Iraqi Christians in their war-torn world. We prayed for peace, reconciliation, and the expansion of the kingdom of God through our efforts at sharing and service.

Small visits can lead to great involvement as people learn and become more active. Each of us has an opportunity to be a missionary everyday and in every location, regardless of where we are. We pray that the love feast may become a daily act of loving our neighbors as Christ instructed us through service and sharing, and may this love spread throughout the world, so that our love will be visible to all.

-- by Charles F. Haeussner, M.D.

## ...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 Kobylišy 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.

## ...BRIDGES... Number 6, 2008: "Set Apart by Hope"

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

As I begin to write this BRIDGES, I am reminded of a note that Gareth Baker from the First Presbyterian Church in Waverly, Ohio sent to me after reading BRIDGES 3, 2008, which had an ecological theme. In that message, Gareth declared: "We agree fully with your ecological concerns, and we also have friends who don't believe we should be concerned about global warming. That seems strange to us when we have had so many weather changes of a severe nature plus the melting of the glaciers. Most people do not have solar panels, but it makes sense.... Evelyn and I used to RV full time...., and we saw that many RV'ers have solar panels installed on their trailers or motor homes. RV'ers are very careful about the environment..." I am grateful to Gareth for thinking about the issues that Dr. Jiří Nečas addressed in the essay which I quoted in BRIDGES 3. Likewise, I hope that you will not mind if I take another look at that theme in this up-date.

Last Friday (June 27), I climbed into the Diaconia's mini-van with several traveling companions, and we headed to Bratislava, Slovakia for the "Gathering of Christians," which brings folks from Poland, Hungary, Austria, Germany, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic together every three years. While I was there, I attended a "Forum" where Dr. Nečas was joined by like-minded presenters from Slovakia, Hungary, and the Czech Republic to consider how we may help protect the environment at this precarious juncture. In spite of very comfortable chairs and very warm temperatures, no one succumbed to an early afternoon nap. The dialogue was both thoughtful and lively, and I was glad that I had chosen that Forum from among the wide range of programming options which were available on Saturday afternoon.

Since I had translated a couple of essays by Dr. Nečas' just a couple of months ago, I did not hear much that was "new," until a member of the panel followed a matter-of-fact reference to the work of secular ecological groups with a telling observation. The Forum's moderator noted that as the extent to which our planet is endangered becomes increasingly more acute, some folks in the secular sphere are finding themselves immersed in a sense of helplessness and hopelessness, which has the potential to hamper efforts to effectively address issues related to climate change. Sometimes, such folks cannot see whether there is much, if anything, which can be done to reverse the process of global warming and similar ills. However, Christians stand in a different position in this regard because they realize that it is not human effort alone that will save our planet. God, the Creator, will not leave us to our own devices in our struggles to live in ways that are more responsible. Thus, we do not need to be trapped in helplessness or despair. We can readily embrace our duty to care for our damaged earth because we are aware that everything does not depend upon our feeble efforts. We are not

working alone. The Lord of Life will not let destructive patterns have the final word.

I left that Forum with the hope that my on-going practice of recycling everything I possibly can will not be in vain. While we must regularly pursue existing efforts to find a way beyond the ecological threat, we simultaneously may be heartened to realize that the solutions for which we long may take a shape that our finite human minds cannot yet imagine.

Such a supposition is one that a-theistic tendencies within our souls and our societies cannot fathom. And yet, a similar word of hope rang true a couple of weeks ago as a clergy member of the Synodal Council reflected on a biblical text prior to introducing the new "general secretary" of the ECCB's national offices to us. "The kingdom of God is here already, but it has not come yet," Pavel Klinecký declared, using common eschatological parlance, before going on to say that we stand between death – in the sense of crucifixion – and life – in the sense of resurrection. That observation may also seem rather commonplace; yet, it struck me as being remarkable in the present age when so many individuals and nations appear to be caught in the iron grip of crucifying realities. Rev. Klinecký offered a compelling cause for hope when he stressed that standing between death and life means that we may—or even "must"—move toward life. We are not held captive by the powers of death – that is not the part of the "between" which has laid claim to us. Rather, we are called to life— that is the challenge and promise of God's gift and will for us, for our neighbors in conflicted areas, and for the little planet which is struggling to bear our weight.

Being BETWEEN life and death means that we are already oriented toward life. Thus, let us embrace our opportunity and responsibility to help our world see that truth more clearly, so that together, we can move beyond the paralysis of hopelessness into a mode of constructive and renewing solidarity with the earth and its people.

## ...BRIDGES... Number 7, 2008: "Centrum"

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

Across the centuries, the Czech lands have sometimes been described as the crossroads – and consequently, the bridge -- between Eastern and Western Europe. In fact, there is a cherished piece of ancient tapestry, which depicts Europe as a human body whose heart is Bohemia. I am happy to say that during August, I had several delightful encounters with the bridging role that the Czech Republic is continuing to play at this point in time.

On August 1, I had the pleasure of meeting with key members of the largest Presbyterian Church in Egypt. When Victor Makari learned of this couple's plans to come to the Czech Republic for vacation, he put us in touch with each other. You see, Victor has a keen appreciation for the value that contacts between Christians from the Middle East and Central Europe may have. Thus, I was honored to be able to tell those two medical professionals a bit about the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, and to hear of the inspiring work that they are carrying out on behalf of Egyptian Christians. "Mrs. Dr. El-Gamal" is quite involved with a very large Sunday School program and a smaller group of young people. In addition, she is writing a daily bible study in Arabic that is designed to bring biblical stories to life for Egyptian children. Both she and her husband frequently travel to conduct training sessions for an international evangelization program. "Mr. Dr. El-Gamal" heads the board of the Evangelical Hospital in Cairo, and spends his "spare" time translating books by renowned Christian authors. Not surprisingly, I left our conversation impressed by these folks' tireless commitment to these acts of service and enriched by new insight into the discipline of translating.

Just days before this, I had expressed interest in greeting the three PC(USA) representatives to the ECCB's annual international youth conference when they arrived in the Czech Republic. Imagine my delight when the ECCB's youth pastor, Filip Keller, invited me to join those folks and Pavel, the host for the Prague portion of the conference, for dinner. Just a few moments of conversation revealed that the American youth had come prepared to enter wholeheartedly into the adventures that awaited them. In spite of their long journey, they chose traditional Czech cuisine, and asked questions that were culturally-aware and quite appropriate. Their thoughtful and articulate reflections on issues that are currently impacting the United States led me to conclude that this trio would be excellent contributors to the youth conference. I am grateful to Betty McGinnis for fielding such a lively and informed delegation.

Likewise, I was pleasantly surprised a few days

later when Jan Dus stopped by my office to introduce me to Jeremy and Jamie Ault. This young couple had recently arrived to continue the outreach work that Kati Salmons had begun on behalf of Jan's congregation in 2006. It was exciting to see the lively forms that PC(USA)/ECCB relations are taking in 2008.

However, for me, the most significant international experience of the summer was provided by the Congress of the International Bonhoeffer Society, which was held on the beautiful campus of the Czech Agricultural University in late July. I had become interested in that opportunity when I was asked to translate the devotional reflections that representatives of the Czech Ecumenical Forum of Christian Women had prepared for that event. Thus, I felt privileged to be able to attend that challenging congress. Cultural and linguistic realities faded into the background as top scholars from all over the world met to consider the significance of Bonhoeffer's legacy for a global community that is caught in the paradoxical throes of secularism and fundamentalism. Professor Jürgen Moltmann and Dr. Martin Marty were just two of the august presenters who contributed to this event, which challenged its participants to grapple with demanding texts and to embrace Bonhoeffer's profoundly life-affirming vision. Although I was disappointed that there was only a handful of Czech participants, I found the conference to be invigorating, as it called church, academy, and society alike to more responsible – and more faithful – patterns of embracing both the delights and sufferings of our world. I had a strong sense that the spirit of reform, which is the legacy of Jan Hus, J.A. Comenius, T. G. Masaryk, Alexander Dubček, and Vaclav Havel (to name just a few of the great Czech "reformers") was being reborn at this unique crossroads where oppression has never dampened the human quest to stand in solidarity with others who are experiencing persecution. May the world continue to listen to those voices from the crossroads of Central Europe that are calling us to cultivate justice in the mist of tyranny and to celebrate the fullness of life in the midst of scarcity and uncertainty.

**...BRIDGES... Number 8, 2008: “A Parable for World Communion Sunday”**  
by Joyce Michael for the ECCB’s American Working Group & PC(USA)’s Czech Mission Network

Everything seemed unremarkable at first. I was quite early for a morning appointment in a relatively unfamiliar part of my neighborhood, so I went to a little park where I expected to spend the extra twenty minutes working on some editing projects that I had with me. Upon entering that sheltered place, I noticed what appeared to be a garbage truck. I vaguely wondered about its location inside of the park as I found a sunny bench and started to work. When some unusually loud voices suddenly broke the silence, I wondered if some homeless persons were being roused from the benches where they had spent the night.

Closer inspection revealed that the “garbage truck” had actually lowered a sizeable container onto the ground near a plot of flowers. As I watched, a number of men and women of various ages and demeanors poured into park and surrounded the flower bed. Some of them were boisterous, indeed, while others were models of “propriety.” However, without exception, all of them were soon engaged in removing the plants that had graced the flower bed, in anticipation of changing temperatures.

I have always marveled at the precision with which the numerous squares and parks in the city of Prague are clothed in climactically-appropriate types of flowers and greenery during the diverse seasons of spring, summer, and fall. Thus, I was delighted to unexpectedly find myself watching a “brigade” of workers who are part of the gardening process. It was almost as if a choreographed performance was going on, as some workers dug up green leafy foliage, while others removed blossoms from flowering specimens before adding them to the collection of plants that apparently were going to be stored in a greenhouse until next summer. The on-going frivolity was tempered by an underlying vigilance, as each member of the brigade energetically – and even reverently – carried out the assigned task.

My twenty minutes passed quickly, and I had to leave the park before the project was completed. Yet, I still remember the camaraderie of the group’s supervisor, the wise and appreciative expression of a robust young woman, the clown-like exuberance of an older woman who may really have been a homeless worker, the strong, yet gentle, movements some of the younger men. There was beauty in the act of “destroying” the flower bed so that it will be able to bloom again next year. There was care – for living things – and there was connection – among human beings. I had a sense that I was witnessing a sort of sacrament of life that would not let its alternative view of beauty, joy, vitality, and gentleness be thwarted by the troubled and troubling realities that many human beings experience day in and day out.

Indeed, some hours later, I began to sense that I had actually seen a parable of what it means to step beyond our usual boundaries when we celebrate World Communion Sunday each year. An e-mail from Central PC in Eugene, Oregon, asking for prayer requests that would be included in a litany for that special day led me to ponder the sense of caring and connection that such litanies invite. A number of images filled my mind, as I began to respond to this invitation.

There was joy that so many Czech folks have been eager to share their insights, expertise, and lives with the participants in the Global Exchange and the upcoming PC(USA)/ECCB partnership conference. There was hope that the ecumenical event, called “Prayer for the Homeland,” which will be held at Mount Řip on October 28 and the celebration of the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the ECCB in November will be powerful reminders of the Christian heritage of this nation. And, there was concern that anticipated changes in the

normative European practice of providing state funding for church workers' salaries and other expenses will be resolved in ways that will be optimal for the continued witness of the church. (The Czech parliament expects to resume debate on a bill dealing with this issue in 2009. However, in the meantime, threats of budget short-falls and staff cut-backs are posing significant concerns for church leaders.)

As these images flooded my mind, it was encouraging to know that World Communion Sunday annually leads us to turn our attention toward our brothers and sisters in other lands by gently, yet vitally, expressing care and making connections in joy and with appreciation. Only thus may the graceful alternative of hope be cultivated, even as we remember the plight of folks who are beset by the troubled and troubling realities that often shadow our world. May cooperation and care abound among, and spread beyond, our communities of faith.

### ...BRIDGES... Number 9, 2008: "In Their Own Words"

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

I was surprised recently when someone "in the know" said that I really needed to do more than merely translate BRIDGES. "You should also write some of your own interpretive reflections," he advised. I was virtually speechless, since I have written most of the 60+ BRIDGES that have been sent since 2003 when the American and Czech Working Groups authorized me to prepare twelve up-dates each year. Occasionally, I have quoted translations of ECCB texts to which you would not otherwise have access, and from time to time, I have worked with reflections written by members of PC(USA) congregations. However, writing BRIDGES is one of the few occasions that I have to "speak for myself," and I greatly enjoy that discipline. Of course, I receive particularly positive comments when I use an article for BRIDGES that one of you has written. Since this tells me that you value hearing from one another as well as from me, I want to let a few of the participants in the Presbyterian Women's Global Exchange speak for themselves by quoting portions of some of the e-mails that they have sent to me following their September adventure, which took them to Ukraine and Hungary, as well as the Czech Republic.

**Mary Beth Lysobey from the Sun Synod exclaims:** "...The trip has changed my life. I wish I could take it again, knowing what I know now. I would learn so much more. I do know that we can learn much from our European sisters and brothers. "Their reaching out in mission is so awesome when you consider their churches came 'out of hiding' less than twenty years ago after more than forty years under communism."

**Rev. Neva Rathbun from the Rocky Mountain Synod says:** "I give thanks to God for the excellent opportunities that you arranged and helped arrange for the Global Exchange group.... I feel that I was especially blessed with many opportunities to fellowship with Czech people and graced by their friendliness and genuine hospitality. The mission work that has begun is enlightening and generates much enthusiasm in my heart to share stories of what God is doing."

**Anna McIlwain from the Synod of the Living Waters writes:** "Your teaching us the wonderful song with its strength and hope and yes, even a touch of sadness added so much to my experience of learning what it means and has meant to be a Christian in the Czech Republic. I actually taught the "Give Us Wisdom, Give Us Courage" song at my first presentation.... In addition, the visits from Czech women meant a lot to me, and I really appreciate...the wealth you found for us in Milada Horáková's letter to her family before she was executed. All of these additions will add so much to my presentations."

**Beverly Roselieb from the Synod of the Southwest declares:** "My mind is still so full of the experiences we shared...in all three countries! I was one of those fortunate enough to have visited the prison.... I am glad you included Vendula's name in your letter.... Please assure

her that I was most appreciative of her efforts on our behalf and most impressed with her work with the men who come to chapel. It was a joy to experience their music and their testimony."

**Christine Fuller of the Synod of the Trinity brings the experiences that the women had after leaving the Czech Republic to life:** "The remainder of the trip went well, in spite of a lot of rain.... I think the time in Carpath-Ukraine was heart-rending for all of us.... Their lives are quite difficult. Still, the spirit of optimism and determination to serve God in whatever way they can surmounts any challenges. I stayed in the home of a young family with one child and another on the way. They had bought their home three years ago and are finishing it as they have money and energy. The floors were covered with hand-woven rug strips. The bathtub and washer were installed in the bathroom. The toilet is an outside privy in the garden. It's a long time since I used one of those! But they were most gracious and welcoming, and we were able to have a very pleasant meal and visit...."

**Joyce's conclusion:** The life-changing power of the Global Exchange is aptly reflected in the awareness that we have much to learn from our Central European brothers and sisters, as we enter into their stories, embrace their songs, and affirm their commitment. May you be inspired and invigorated by the thoughtful paragraph in which **Beverly Roselieb's** concludes: "...The Christian commitment of both the Czech and Hungarian people to one another and to those in need is so amazing such a short time after being under Communist rule. Somewhere in my reflections, I recall someone saying something about a hymn "A Fire Burning in our Hearts." I certainly saw and felt evidence of that as we experienced firsthand all that is being done through the Diaconia and the churches there."

### ...BRIDGES... Number 10, 2008: "Reforming Women"

by Joyce Michael on behalf of the Czech Mission Network and the American Working Group

When the Presbyterian Women's Global Exchange was in the Czech Republic, I was invited to write an article about the Czech Mission Network and the American Working Group for *Horizons* magazine. Later, I was also asked to compose five or six vignettes of women who had been part of the Czech Reformation. Initially, I was bemused by that request because I was aware that few women were directly involved in the Czech Reformation, whose best-known proponent, Jan Hus, was burned at the stake in 1415. However, as I began to explore this question in a bit more depth, I discovered some interesting connections that I would like to share with you in affirmation of the creative role that women have played throughout history and in celebration of the Global Exchange's steadfast commitment to telling the story of Czech Christians to the congregations that they began visiting after they returned to the United States in late September.

**Nuns:** A number of women, who were called "nuns," are reported to have positioned themselves under the pulpit from which Hus delivered his powerful sermons. One of these was Anežka Štítná, whose father, Tomáš, was a trailblazer who helped prepare Bohemia for Hus' revolutionary reforms. Hus is said to have dedicated a little book entitled "Regarding Knowledge of the True Path to Salvation" to Anežka. Thus, it is evident that she and other women like her were a source of real inspiration to Hus.

**Prostitutes:** Another group of women, who benefited from, and symbolized, the gracious ideals of the Czech Reformation, lived at "New Jerusalem." That house of asylum for prostitutes was founded in 1372 by Jan Milič of Kroměříž, a predecessor of Hus who advocated poverty, service, and reform. Neither the asylum nor an adjacent school for preachers outlived Milič. However, the frequent communion services that the women shared at the asylum's Chapel of Mary of Magdalene gave rise to a strong community, bound together by prayer and penitence, which continued after Milič's death and contributed to the spirit of openness that enabled Hus' message to have currency.

**"Communicants:"** It is believed that an aunt of the bellicose Hussite reformer, Jan Žižka, was the Mother Superior of a Dominican convent located next to the Church of St. Anne in Prague's Old Town. That convent offered shelter to Žižka during the skirmishes, which followed Hus' death. Žižka's kinswoman is also thought to have permitted the members of her convent to

participate in one of the most striking reforms advocated by the Hussite movement – the act of serving wine, as well as bread, to everyone during communion. This practice confirmed that both lay women and lay men are equal to the clergy in the eyes of God.

**Anne of Bohemia, Queen of England (1367-1394)** was the daughter of the renowned Czech king and Holy Roman Emperor, Charles IV. As a young girl, this devout woman was given in marriage to England's Richard II for political reasons. Queen Anne became a strong – and beloved – advocate of reconciliation and mercy who won the admiration of John Wycliffe. It is likely that her intercession contributed to Jerome of Prague's desire to introduce Wycliffe's writings to Jan Hus and other reform-minded thinkers following his studies at Oxford. Thus, Anne helped plant an important seed of the Czech Reformation.

**Žofie, Queen of Bohemia (1376-1425):** Queen Žofie, the wife of Václav IV, was quite devoted to, and supportive of, Jan Hus. It is said that Jan Žižka escorted her to hear the stirring sermons that Hus delivered in the newly-built Bethlehem Chapel. Žofie wrote an emphatic letter to Rome when Wycliffe's writings were censured and Hus was summoned to appear before the Cardinal. She may also have used her influence to convince the king to permit several churches to celebrate Communion using both wine and bread. After Hus was martyred, Žofie continued to hold to his followers in high regard and extended benevolent neutrality to them following Václav's death.

### ...BRIDGES... Number 11, 2008: "A Musical Foundation"

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

It has been an "American Autumn" here in Prague, as we have welcomed two illustrious groups from the Presbyterian Church (USA). In September, the careful preparations and respectful spirit of this year's participants in the Presbyterian Women's Global Exchange impressed and encouraged their Czech hosts. PC(USA) participants in October's Partnership Conference were equally insightful and sincere as they began to explore the possibility of forming long-term relationships with ECCB congregations. The sense of good-will generated by both of these visits, is still bearing fruit, and it is my prayer that the Czech and American folks involved in these two events will find creative ways to support one another as they cultivate long-term relationships. I perceive that such cooperative endeavors already have a strong foundation insofar as, in a deep sense, these special groups are already bound together musically.

You see, I wanted the Presbyterian women to leave the Czech Republic overflowing with words and tones that have special significance for ECCB congregations. Thus, I chose a cherished chorus, which we learned to sing in Czech and English by repeating its tune and words at nearly every worshipful moment we shared. The incredible richness of the voices of the participants in the Global Exchange made those musical moments quite meaningful.

However, the melody did not end there. I used the same chorus to connect separate sections of the devotions on the theme of walking together that I was invited to share at one of the Partnership Conference's concluding sessions in the Krkonoše mountain community of Janské Lázně. Perhaps the melody of that evening will resound again as you read my written text:

"Give us wisdom, courage, too,  
For days of fear, for days of trouble,  
To go with you across the chasm,  
Give us wisdom, courage, too."

Walking together is being there for, and with, one another when life's circumstances lead us to join the Psalmist in 'crying aloud to God, **aloud** to God, that God may hear us. In the days of trouble, we seek the Lord; in the night, our hands are stretched out without ceasing; our souls refuse to be comforted. We think of God, and we moan. We meditate, and our spirits faint.' (Ps 77:1-3)

At such times, we may do well to take the words of Božena Komárková to heart. That Czech advocate of human rights reminds us that "...Christ's sacrifice put him in solidarity with humankind and the world to the point of death in a place for outcasts.... Thus, our responsibility for our brothers and sisters, for the world, and for the task of ...standing in for those who do not know of God's grace has been set forth,"

Walking together means going with our brothers

and sisters across the chasm. Thus, we may whole-heartedly sing:

"Give us wisdom, courage, too  
To forego everything for the truth,  
To remember the suffering people,  
Give us wisdom, courage, too."

Professor Jakub Trojan of the Protestant Theological Faculty similarly reminds us that walking together requires us to bring graceful truths to life. He declares: "In light of our faith, we are obligated to eliminate the most flagrant manifestations of injustice and poverty, the most blatant displays of human brokenness, and underlying systemic inadequacies. Criticism of everything that destroys the lives of our neighbors and of our creation is part of faith."

These words remind us that hope for wholeness necessarily arises out of brokenness. Thus, we may recall Isaiah's vision of the transformation that may come to those who walk together on life's difficult paths. "Bring forth the people who are blind, yet have eyes; who are deaf, yet have ears. Let the nations gather together, and the peoples assemble." (Is 43:8-9)

Again and again, the hope for wholeness arises out of brokenness, so let us sing anew:

"Give us wisdom, courage, too  
For the times of daily living,  
May our love shine brightly therein;  
Give us wisdom, courage, too." Amen.

At Janské Lázně, there was not much time to rehearse that chorus, so initially our tones were rather discordant. But then, Tomáš Najbrt, who had come to introduce us to the many medieval instruments that he so skillfully plays, picked up a lute and accompanied our faltering voices. Tomáš thus provided the foundation that was needed to transform our wavering sounds into a graceful melody. May this example of the manner in which wholeness arises out of brokenness be a good foundation for all of our fragile efforts.

### ...BRIDGES... Number 12, 2008: "Taking Flight"

by Joyce Michael on behalf of the Czech Mission Network and the American Working Group

In October, some of the participants in the Partnership Conference suggested that I share the devotions that I presented at Janské Lázně in BRIDGES. Thus, I included the first part of those reflections in BRIDGES 11. Since it now strikes me that the heart of my October mediation may point us toward a new way of being, I have decided to offer those words to you as my Christmas/New Year's greeting for 2008.

Recently, as I translated a story book about Krtek (the little mole), so that a conference member will be able to read it to her grandson when she returns home, I was intrigued by this image: "The butterfly circles over the glade; he flutters in the wind. 'Fly with me, my dear snail, and see the world,' he says. But the snail replies, 'we all do what we can. Believe me, my friend. I do not have wings, so I crawl along the earth.'"

These words may be taken as affirming that we all have our place and way, whether that be soaring through the sky or crawling along the earth. However, I am inclined to be a bit more adventuresome these days. Thus, I want to extol the possibility of flight. Not superficially, I hope, but genuinely and irrepressibly, almost as if we had no other way of walking together, except with joy and delight.

I have enjoyed quite a few moments of "flight" during the Partnership Conference, although the week began with a new wave of uncertainty about the future. Indeed, I was feeling rather weary when I arrived at the office the day that you arrived in Prague. It was as if I was a snail, crawling along the earth until Magda told me of the now-infamous banana explosion. "I asked for 25 bananas, and I received 25 kilos," she said. And I began to laugh, and laugh, and laugh.

Perhaps, I was blind, yet, I had eyes. Maybe, I was deaf, yet, I had ears. I did not have to crawl along the earth like a pitiable creature. I could soar above "myself" and let our time together fill me with joy and delight. Thus, on Tuesday evening, I quietly repeated the banana story to Peter Stephens, and my usually-reserved British friend broke out into such enthusiastic laughter that a few of you looked around to see where the mirth was coming from. Peter laughed, and I recalled a parable that I wrote many years ago.

Based on a passage by Friedrich Nietzsche, that describes the people of the world rocking back and forth in agony at the despair and suffering that are inherent in life, my parable suddenly envisions an old couple in China, who are also rocking back and forth in great distress until the old man's face breaks into a wrinkled, toothless

grin. The old woman's face similarly explodes, and a quiet, almost silent laughter irrepressibly begins – and grows until there is a chuckle here, a chortle there, and a giggle in between. The laughter grows until both the old man and the old lady are laughing with unrestrained delight. And now, they are rocking back and forth again, in the delicious rhythm of joy. And now, the laughter is spreading like a tidal wave to person after person over the face of the whole earth.

I do not know how I came to write that parable, but I do know that when I read it aloud, my very reserved parents both began to laugh in a way that I have rarely seen and heard before or since. Thus, I am bound to conclude that when we are walking together in the vision of God's truth, we do not have to crawl along the earth. Even the most weighted down of us can find a way to hope. Even the most sightless can find a deeper vision. Even the dullest of hearing can find a way to the profound melodies of grace and love.

If we read Isaiah 43:8-9 without much analysis, we may conclude that it is a liberating vision that will bring the nations together. Or perhaps, it describes an influx of hope and delight that may break into our world whenever God's people come together with humble expectation. Either way, it is my prayer that as we nurture the partnerships that are being planted, we will not be content to crawl along the ground. Indeed, as we share our sufferings and our doubts, may blindness be graced by sight, and woundedness be transformed by mercy. Alleluia-Amen.

Nietzsche correctly says that "we do not fly into flying," so let us be encouraged as we prayerfully sing a final time:

"Give us wisdom, courage, too  
For the many small steps needed.  
Lord, remain with us yet further,  
Give us wisdom, courage, too."

Holy God, as we open our whole selves to you, fill us with your spirit, so that your light, your love, and your life may radiate through us and overflow into our wounded world. Hear our prayers. Amen.