

...BRIDGES... Number 3, 2009: "Walking Together!"

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

After John gone to visit his family in Pennsylvania, he phoned me at my parents' home in Ohio one January morning, and said: "There has been a disaster in Prague." I immediately thought of a fire, a bombing, or some other large-scale event. Thus, I breathed a sigh of relief when I learned that the disaster to which John had referred was an unequivocal demand that the Walking Together Center vacate the premises that it had been leasing from Prague 11 by end of February. Yet, my sense of relief was short lived, as I realized that in some sense, Prague 11's decision had the potential to spell disaster for an important service, which not only cared for homeless mothers and families in a nurturing and rehabilitative way, but also provided a positive image of what can happen when a secular social service agency and a Protestant congregation join forces. Maybe the word "disaster" did capture the magnitude of what was taking place in Jižní Město. When I returned to Prague later in January, negotiations between the church, the center, the city of Prague, and the district of Prague 11 were underway. A public demonstration had occurred, and a letter-writing campaign had been initiated within the Czech Republic and the wider Ekumena. The outcry was great, especially among international church partners that had helped finance the construction of a new church for the Jižní Město (Spořilov) congregation next to the building that housed the Walking Together Center's shelter for homeless families and related services. Unfortunately by the time that I was settled in enough to write about this situation, Jan Dus had begun a three-month study leave and was unavailable to distribute BRIDGES. Thus, I could not send you my reflections on this matter. However, I did send e-mail alerts to folks who had participated in the Global Exchange, the Partnership Conference, and PC(USA) study tours. In addition, Jody Filipi used the Czech Mission Network website to get the news out to even more of you. Thus, letters of concern from the United States joined letters from

Germany, England, Holland, and a number of other countries in raising a murmur of protest.

Jody also solicited prayers prior to a public demonstration that took place in front of the Prague City Hall on February 19. Thus, I felt a bit like your personal representative when I joined some 250 other folks for a very respectful, but extremely sincere, protest. Since I arrived early on that unusually cold morning, I was able to watch the other protesters assemble. ECCB pastors; members of my own, and a number of other, ECCB, congregations; folks from the Synodal Council, the Central Church Offices, the ECCB's Diaconia, and even some sympathetic public officials joined representatives of the center and the church in recalling the story of their partnership and the events that had unfolded in the preceding months. Prior to the speeches, the demonstration's leaders tried to teach us to make appropriate sounds of protest and affirmation. Although we did not seem to be very good at that activity (maybe because of the low temperatures?!), we did join an enthusiastic instrumental group in giving voice to some stirring choruses and hymns. A pale sun against a grey sky drew our attention to the danger that extreme temperatures may pose for the poorest of the poor. Would our shivering presence make a difference?

That question had a positive answer, insofar as the center was granted a thirty-day reprieve so that negotiations could continue. However, in the end, Prague 11 refused to budge. Thus, an article written for the *Czech Protestant News* in mid-March reported that the Walking Together Center had

begun to make other plans. Its director would house the center's offices in her flat; the church would provide space for the counseling and advice center; social integration programs would be carried out in the field; and apartments set aside for needy people would be sought from city authorities. These plans revealed that Prague 11's decision would not spell the end of the Walking Together Center and its relationship to the Jižní Město congregation.

Yet, even that report was not quite the whole story. When I showed the original, rather controversial ending of this BRIDGES to Gerhard Frey-Reininghaus in mid-April, he suggested that I read a letter that had just been sent to several leaders of the Czech government about the damage that Prague 11's action had done to "the interest of the Czech Republic abroad." You may also want to take a look at the English translation of that letter at www.sos-azyl.cz, which is the website that is devoted to this situation. There, you may get a sense of the power that words may have even in this audio-visual age, insofar as after this letter was written, negotiations between the Center, the city of Prague, and Czech governmental authorities resumed. I invite and encourage you to "stay tuned" to the Czech Mission Network's Website – www.czechconnections.org – for the next chapter in this on-going drama of faith in action. Thank you for continuing to embrace the Jižní Město congregation and the Walking Together Center with your most hopeful thoughts and prayers.