

Bridges 2004

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Bridges - A Gift

Every morning for two weeks in January 2003, I was privileged to provide the director of the Prague Philharmonia with practice speaking English, as he prepared to attend an international conference in France. As we discussed a variety of topics, which ranged from practical vocabulary to world events to Czech politics, I felt as if I had been given a gift. But, I knew that this truly was the case when Dr. Smid used his command of English to reveal something of what it means to cherish human beings from other cultures and different traditions as the gifts from God that they surely are.

A smile played in his eyes as Dr. Smid told me of traveling with the Philharmonia in Japan. One morning after leaving the hotel, he went into a nearby pastry shop to purchase two small cakes for the day's journey. He thought that there would be ample time to make his purchase while his companions were getting settled into the bus. However, he realized that this was not going to be the case when he saw the shopkeeper giving painstaking attention to every fold of the paper and every curl of the ribbon as she slowly wrapped the cakes. Seeing that the bus was ready to depart, Dr. Smid was restless — until he became aware of the artistry that was unfolding in front of him. As he relaxed, he began to be grateful for the traditions of hospitality and excellence that came to a climax when the shopkeeper placed her creation in his hand with a gentle smile.... "As I walked to the bus, I carried my little package as if it was a beautiful gift," he declared.

Dr. Smid concluded his remembrances without further comment, but I have carried his reflections further in my mind as the months have passed and our world has become ever more fragmented. The conclusions that I have reached are far too simple to address the rampant conflicts and growing "disease" that is the order of this time. However, it seems to me that human beings throughout the world might do well to cherish the traditions that people who are somehow "different" from them have to offer. It has been my experience that no matter how different their inclinations and traditions may appear to be, most of the people we meet come before us bearing gifts. However, we human beings are sometimes so focused on what we understand and what we have to offer that we do not even realize that a gift has been prepared for us.

It was similar centuries ago when a carpenter — who appeared to be nothing more than a common man — came among people who were longing for a powerful king to set them free and establish peace. That man called the people to embark on a way characterized by service, compassion, and humility, and, in the end, few people were able to recognize and receive the gift of life that he had come to offer. Few people imagined that this 'suffering servant' could be their true liberation and deepest peace. The world was not able to treasure the gift that had been prepared for it.

It has often been thus in our very human world, which has remained driven by fear and fascinated with power. Yet, I dare to believe that our true liberation and deepest peace will arrive without fanfare or force. Thus, we may do well to be expectant and vigilant when people who appear to be different in inclination and tradition come before us bearing gifts. As we recognize these people to be the gifts from God that they surely are, perhaps acts of humble hospitality will help foster the ways of peace that are so urgently needed by our world and in our lives. May you recognize and welcome the gifts of love that have been prepared for you, as other human beings offer themselves to you and as Christ's call to the 'heartlands' of compassion and service invites you to enter into a new way of being and doing.

Bridges – Easter Greetings

Although you will not receive this message until after the Day of Resurrection has come and gone, I am writing these reflections on Maundy Thursday. In Czech parlance, Christ's journey to the cross begins on what is known as "Green Thursday." Thus, this evening, John and I will attend a service where the reading of the passion narrative will be punctuated by the singing of hymns. Tomorrow, the Lord's Supper will be served in the context of "Great Friday" worship. On "White Saturday," organ music will provide the backdrop for reflections on Christ's love, and communion will also be celebrated during the morning worship service on Easter, which, in keeping with the Czech designation for the Passover, is referred to as "God's Great Night." Of course, this listing of events cannot convey the ways in which the Easter truth will actually be disclosed as remembrances of betrayal and death are transformed by encounters with the supreme victory of Life and Love. However, I do not doubt that this transformation will take place in the Czech Republic, in the United States, and throughout the world. Indeed, I trust that the entire Easter season will be a time of renewal and hope for each of you.... With warm regards, Joyce

DID YOU KNOW that... ..twice a year, representatives from the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, the Protestant Theological Faculty, and the ECCB's Diaconia gather to review the most recent issue of a publication that is entitled the *Czech Protestant News*. After perusing the copy that will be sent to the printer, the group turns its attention to the next issue of "the bulletin." Each of the representatives describes newsworthy issues and events that are specific to their milieu; topics for "feature" articles are discussed; and authors are identified. As the articles are written, they are forwarded to folks who translate them into German and English. Then, the translations are sent to two clever 'wizards' who format and edit the texts. As a result of an agreement between the ECCB and the PC(USA's) Worldwide Ministries Division, much of the content of the *Czech Protestant News* is later incorporated into the *Czech Working Group Newsletter* that many of you receive each autumn and spring.

THE REST OF THE STORY... is that usually, more news is submitted to the *Czech Protestant News* than the eight pages allotted for it can hold. This state of affairs means that many editorial decisions must be made, as "the bulletin's" formatters seek to condense detailed articles in ways that faithfully preserve their intent. On occasion, this process seems to be time-consuming and cumbersome. However, in the end, it is exciting to realize that the ECCB has so many stories that it is eager to share with people in other lands. Indeed, insofar as the abundance of news reflects the vitality of the church, its seminary, and the Diaconia, it may illustrate a flourishing participation in the Easter promise. The folks who contribute to "the bulletin" want to let the whole world know about the many ways in which the ECCB is seeking to foster the sorts of graceful transformation which have been bequeathed to it by Life's unquenchable power and are enabled by God's merciful goodness.

AN INVITATION

The articles included in the *Czech Protestant News* are not the whole story, of course. Thus, members and friends of the PC(USA) are cordially invited (and heartily encouraged) to send articles about Czech connections that are being cultivated in the United States to johnmichael@webpgh.com. We are eager to include news about your relationships with Czech Christians and ECCB churches in up-coming editions of the *Czech Working Group Newsletter*.

Bridges - International Notes

The month of May is rapidly disappearing, and I am just now beginning to write this month's "edition" of Bridges. I might apologize for its late arrival. However, you may be encouraged by the fact that this update has been delayed because a significant amount of face-to-face bridge-building has been occurring in the Czech Republic in recent weeks. A few verbal snap-shots may provide you with a taste of a remarkably "international" period.

Anticipatory events in March and April

In mid-March, Burkhard Paetzold, who is the Worldwide Ministries Division's regional liaison for this part of Europe, was in Prague to visit with leaders of the ECCB, its Diaconia, and the Protestant Theological Faculty. Burkard also met with the pastor of the ECCB church in Prague-Vinohrady, the director of the Czech Ecumenical Council of Churches, and with the head of an ecumenical agency for volunteers called SERVIS. A visit to the site of the new church that is being built in a massive housing project in the southern part of Prague and lunch with the ECCB's advocate for Roma rounded out Burkhard's adventure in nurturing the ties that bind the PC(USA) and the ECCB.

On April 29, a small group of individuals from Germany, Poland, Britain, and the United States assembled in Prague to discuss their common heritage and unique features with representatives of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren. Lively conversation ensued, and new understandings emerged.

The next day, a different group of guests from the Netherlands, Germany, and Italy arrived in Valašské Meziříčí to participate in the dedication of the ECCB's beautiful new hospice, which will also serve as a training center for caregivers from throughout the Czech Republic. Several of the church and governmental representatives who were part of that event related the opening of the Hospice to the impending entry of the Czech Republic into the European Union. The promise of international harmony was also quite evident to John and me as international guests and Czech hosts spent a relaxing evening together at a nearby church retreat center before returning to Prague the next day.

Throughout May

On May 5, John and I were honored to greet six Presbyterians from Sun City Arizona who had expressed interest in renewing some long-standing relationships with the ECCB while they touring Prague. Nadeje Mandysova (emeritus director of the Czech Ecumenical Council of Churches), Ruzena Cerna (the ECCB's advocate for Roma), and I spent the morning acquainting this congenial group with some of the current trends within the ECCB. Thus long-term connections were strengthened (and new relationships were established with members of the group who were visiting the Czech Republic for the first time).

On May 12, the PC(USA)'s coordinator for mission work in Middle East and Europe, arrived in Prague to participate in the 31st Session of the Synod of the ECCB. During his five days in the Czech Republic, Dr. Makari listened carefully, and responded thoughtfully, to a number of groups and individuals who winsomely shared their insights into Czech history, culture, and faith with him. An especially important conversation about ways to strengthen connections between the ECCB and PC(USA) took place when Dr. Makari spent the morning with the American Working Group. In addition to expressing commitment to fostering a close relationship between the two denominations, Dr. Makari also suggested a number of ways in which the strengths of the ECCB could be shared with Middle Eastern nations and with the American Church. An exciting new day seems to be at hand!

**Bridges – Remarks by Rev. Joe Ruml
on benefits and responsibilities entry into the EU may have for churches in member countries.**

When John and I returned to Prague on May 1 after attending the dedication of the hostage, the city was awash with visitors. Some of those folks had come to attend an international hockey tournament. However, other people were present to celebrate the nation's entry into the European Union. It was evident that many people shared the sense of hopeful expectation that the Moderator and Lay Moderator expressed in a letter to other churches in EU nations. "We are...experiencing joy...because something of which our distant ancestors could only dream is becoming reality." Of course, many opinions about the Czech Republic's entry into the EU were circulating prior to, and have continued to develop since, that event. At soon point, I hope to reflect a bit more personally on these matters in a Mission Connections Letter. However, at this point, I want to share with some key emphases that the Moderator of the ECCB expressed in an address about the implications of joining the EU delivered at a conference for church leaders that was held in Vienna on June 4-5, 2004. Although space constraints have made it necessary for me to omit large sections of this address, I hope that the following paragraphs will give you a sense of Rev. Ruml's understanding of the benefits and responsibilities that entry into the EU will may for churches in member countries.

...Churches, including, among others, the minority reformed protestant church of the Czech Brethren, have also entered the European Union along with the Czech nation.... Czech society belongs among the most atheistic societies in Europe. Therefore, its expectations are also, first and foremost, related to economic losses and gains and are concerned with other values only consequentially... *Our nation is still learning to live in freedom, and to not be afraid of freedom.* Yet, the church has an advantage insofar as, *through the instrumentality and the call of the Lord God, it has a summons to freedom...* That is why I cannot view the *opportunity of living within the community of European nations as anything but a proposal from the Lord God...*

The Czech Protestant Church is commanded by its biblical foundations and its heritage to maintain a *critical stance toward the state and human institutions...* Therefore, it is the churches' task to keep a watchful eye on the paths that politicians, who are focused more on the ends than on the means, often tread. It is the churches' task to 'raise a warning finger' everywhere that they recognize the ominous human tendency to ascribe a salvific character to the service offered by politicians.

...Henceforth, the task of the church will remain to plausibly and concretely introduce the call of the gospel to the universal pull of success, popularity, and prosperity, in whose aftermath, there sometimes remain far too many victims of cynicism, pain, and disillusionment. We expect that the European milieu will offer us a more intimate...setting for interchurch dialogue and collaboration. Thus, we may...reveal that the standard of living is dependent on building a milieu of trust, hope, truth, and justice. The fellowship of the church and relationships among churches must be a symbol for others that it is possible to construct such settings; that it is possible to create such a milieu.

...I see the Church's role...to reside in this: we are called by God to arrive at a better formulate of that which has been the foundation of human life since its creation, by articulating this more vigorously, more faithfully, more plausibly, and in ways that are theologically clear and explicit through a rapprochement of the traditions of individual nations. Europe will be a peaceful society only when peaceful people live in it. The simplest way to enduring peace lies in Jesus Christ.... therefore, let us be united in truth and integrity by following him.

Printed with Rev. Ruml's permission and edited slightly for the sake of clarity.

Bridges - A Meditation on Light and Darkness

I have been wanting to acquaint you with the writings of the Czech advocate of human rights whose essays were the focus of my translating activities for a number of months. However, I did not have a clear sense of how to do until my eyes were drawn to some verses from the gospel of John that are printed on a calendar given to me by a young Czech friend. "In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." (John 1:4-5 NRSV)

I looked at the light that was penetrating the grey backdrop of the cave depicted on the calendar, and I felt the warm sunshine that was flooding the apartment which has become home to John and me. "In him was life." In truth!, I thought. Nevertheless, images of terror and terrorists, bombings and explosions, kidnappings and torture, oppression and vengeance flooded my mind, and I found myself considering the gospel's affirmation of light in terms of shattering peace and shattered lives. In our troubled world, who could reasonably declare that "the light shine in the darkness" and who could reasonably dare to hope that "the darkness will not overcome the light?"

The questions seem bleak, but in other dark ages, people of faith have spoken words of life, and the darkness has NOT prevailed. The light has not been overcome..., thanks to messengers whose graceful examples have shown our shadowy world a more gentle way. The light has not been extinguished by darkness..., thanks to inspiring messengers like Božena Komárková, who reminds us how necessary words of life are when she says: "Evil, as the outgrowth of human guilt vis-à-vis God and thus vis-à-vis humankind, complicates the tableau of the Christian world." (Ve Světě..., 123) Komárková assures us that affirmations of light and life are possible because 'Christ's resurrection defies our fear of the end of existence....' (paraphrase, Ve Světě..., 122) And, Komárková reveals that words of light and life are reconciling when she writes: "Through Christ's sacrifice, which put him in solidarity with humankind and the world..., our responsibility for our brother...and for everyone who does not know about God's grace has been set forth. (Ve Světě, 122)

Božena Komárková's words serve as light to our world's darkness because they were written during a time that was equally as tortured as these days are. You see, Komárková survived internment by the Nazis, only to spend the rest of her life under constant surveillance by communist leaders who were threatened by her advocacy of human rights. Thus, Komárková's affirmations of the light that shines in the darkness are more than superficial daydreams. Komárková speaks from within the heart of darkness, so a compelling integrity seems to characterize statements about love and mercy like the one where she declares.

The body, which the Son of God accepted..., is not only a confirmation of God's love for humankind and the source of human hope; it is also an affirmation of all created reality.... This is why everything that exists has value and is very good.... This is why it is acceptable to love the world and its gifts: because they are God's gifts. And God's love, which has created everything, is so great that neither sin nor death can take it away from the human being. (Ve Světě, 122)

The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it because YOU know what it means to stand in solidarity with human beings in this world — seeing other persons not "as a product of nature and history, but as beings created in the image of God." (Ve Světě..., 123) YOU know what it means to assume responsibility for your brother — not "as a lost cosmic or social atom, but as a being whom God has called by his own name." (Ve Světě..., 122) YOU know what it means to stand with those who do not yet know God's grace until they gain a sense of "freedom whose measure is not the infinity of the universe, but the love of Christ." (Ve Světě..., 123) May the light that is life itself continue to shine by the grace of God.

Bridges - "With a Voice of Singing."

"With a voice of singing, declare ye this and let it be heard!" Thus begins an anthem, which has meant a great deal to me ever since I was part of a festival chorus that performed this work. That event occurred many years ago, but I have repeatedly experienced the transforming power of the voice of singing. For instance, I have seen popular music become the impetus for movements of peace, unity, justice, and compassion, and I have felt religious music quicken people's sense of God's comforting presence, Christ's challenging call, and Life's sacred goodness. I have heard, seen, and felt the renewing power of the voice of singing.

However, until recently, I was not aware that institutional bodies and administrative leaders are as amenable to being shaped by the voice of singing as individuals and grass-roots organizations may be. In fact, I have not always been mindful that administrative agencies are commonly made up of individual seekers who feel deeply and reflect carefully. Thus, I am grateful that recurring opportunities to interact with the national leaders of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren have refuted lingering, subconscious stereotypes about high-level administrators and national agencies. Indeed, I am especially thankful that I have been able to see the transforming power of the voice of singing which is at work within the administrative branches of the ECCB.

I want to expand on that comment by recalling that in November 2003, the ECCB installed an entirely new leadership team, which lacks direct continuity with the preceding Synodal Council that heroically guided the Church throughout the years of transition which followed the collapse of the communist regime. The new Council has inherited many challenges and faces responsibilities that might be daunting, if its members could not sing together. However, that group is made up of a guitarist, a singer, three pianists, and a composer who are approaching their tasks with a voice of singing that is uniting them in a spirit of respectful cooperation.

This harmonious course is very valuable since the present council has begun its work with a completely clean slate! Insofar as no long-standing patterns must be preserved, the entire Church is anticipating — and is prepared for — change. This state of affairs has given rise to a certain sense of freedom, which Moderator Ruml alludes to when he says: "I do not feel the need to protect my position." Instead, Rev. Ruml is seeking to develop open relationships and to foster a spirit of solidarity among church workers that may facilitate a creative approach to "that which has been given." Thus, the voice of singing, which unites the council in a spirit of solidarity, may bring more and more people within the range of its harmony.

Forging new directions is a complex process that might spawn tense deliberations if such harmony did not enable the members of the council to fully accept, and willingly share, responsibility for both the positive and negative results of their decisions. However, the present council is letting itself be led by a new song, which is characterized by a degree of enthusiasm, creativity, and service that would have been unimaginable fifteen years ago. Thus, its story surely confirms the possibility that the "sad songs," which so often resound in our world, can actually be transformed by new tonalities.

I want to add that I am grateful that in August, I was able to experience the voice of singing that binds the staff of the Worldwide Ministries Division in Louisville to all of PC(USA)'s mission co-workers. Those committed folks (who support us so faithfully when we are far from home) hosted this year's Mission Sharing Conference with the sorts of warmth, humor, and honesty that are the hallmark of faithful seekers who 'feel deeply and think carefully.' It is my prayer that the grace, which characterized the Sharing Conference, will radiate throughout the PC(USA), uniting more and more people in a spirit of solidarity within the range of a God-granted harmony.

Bridges - "All over this Land"

As a prelude to more intentional efforts to link congregations which have a relationship with the ECCB, its Seminary, and the Diaconia, I want to share some "verbal snapshots" of interested congregations that John and I were privileged to visit in August and September. If our experiences in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and West Virginia are representative, it seems reasonable to conclude that there are Czech connections 'all over the land:' in 'mid-America' and beyond!

Pine Run PC is located on a winding rural road in western Pennsylvania. The morning we spent with that congregation was notable for the way that the church musicians supported the themes of my sermon and John's slide show. The choir's anthem amplified my considerations of what it means to live "For the Sake of Joy," and the pianist spontaneously improvised an offertory using the tune of a Czech hymn that John had sung at the conclusion of the sermon.

Rehoboth PC is also located in a rural area in southwest Pennsylvania. John's slides elicited a number of questions, which, in turn, led to many interesting conversations after the worship hour and during a church picnic that was held at a nearby park. I was particularly moved by the comments of several elderly people who thoughtfully reflected on the need for our world to find its way to peace.

Little Britain PC is located near Pennsylvania's border with Maryland. Although this congregation is currently without a pastor, a number of folks gathered at the church to share a midweek potluck dinner with John and me. This relaxed setting issued in a fascinating assortment of questions about the Czech church and our work. We are grateful for the interest and encouragement that was expressed by this supportive group.

Fox Chapel PC is a large church located in suburban Pittsburgh which has an on-going relationship with the ECCB's Diaconia. At the first of two gatherings organized by this congregation, members of Fox Chapel described previous contacts with the Diaconia and anticipated a mission trip to the Czech Republic that was slated to occur in late August. The people who attended the second gathering were especially inquisitive about a number of issues related to the ECCB and our endeavors! Reciprocal learning and valuable sharing characterized both evenings.

Mount Pisgah PC is a lively congregation that is also located in a suburban Pittsburgh neighborhood. This church has a long history of fostering interracial connections on the local level, even as it contributes to international missions. Participation in the Eucharist and the receptiveness of a delightful group of children to a Czech *pohádka* (story) made our experiences at Mount Pisgah quite memorable.

Indianola PC is located near the campus of Ohio State University, and is the site of my first encounter with the intricacies of the Czech language. Thus, it was very meaningful to be able share with that congregation and to thank its members for the role that Indianola's Czech connections played in furthering my interest in, and involvement with, the ECCB.

John Stewart United Methodist Church and First PC in Upper Sandusky Ohio joined together to welcome John and me to this county seat town in north central Ohio. Our evening with these congregations was distinguished by a high degree of interest, which generated a large number of questions and a powerful affirmation of our unity in Christ. It was exciting to have an opportunity to foster interdenominational ties, even as we sought to strengthen international connections.

First PC in Waverly Ohio is closely related to the PC(USA)'s Bristol Village Retirement Community. Thus, the people with whom we worshipped and shared during our time in Waverly were exceptionally responsive. We appreciated having an opportunity to renew ties with people who have participated in study tours to the Czech Republic and/or who attended the workshop on Comenius that I led at that church in 2001.

First PC in Parkersburg West Virginia was also an exciting place to be! It was an honor to be part of the start of this fall's program of Wednesday night gatherings at that church. The hospitality was grand, the singing was joyful, the fellowship with warm, and we left Parkersburg with several tangible reminders of ways that we can foster living ties between members of First PC and the ECCB.

First PC in Logan Ohio is a county-seat church with a proud heritage of community involvement. Thus, the group which gathered at the church on a Sunday evening in late September came prepared to ask a broad range of thoughtful questions about the ECCB. As a result, absorbing conversations characterized our entire evening at First PC. There certainly does appear to be a lot of interest in the ECCB 'all over the land!'

Bridges - Celebrations!!

When John and I returned to the Czech Republic at the end of September, we could not have anticipated the flurry of exciting events that would await us, but I am pleased to be able to tell you that:

On October 24, we attended an afternoon worship service in which a new pastor was installed at one of two ECCB congregations located in the Žižkov section of Prague. All of the elements of a joyful celebration were in place as a modest worship area filled with people. The presiding pastor read Psalm 121 in a compelling way; a thoughtful prayer was offered by another minister; and the installee delivered a sermon that invited us to learn to practice the art of waiting. After the installee and congregation had pledged to support one another in mutual service, ministerial colleagues and lay representatives brought greetings from a number of other churches. Honesty, humor, and warmth characterized those remarks, and particular delight was generated by the musical interludes that punctuated the event. A visiting choir sang a cappella works characterized by exquisite harmony; a youthful group from the installee's previous congregation sang lively tunes to guitar accompaniment; and eventually, a number of children joined the installee in singing a cheerful chorus that he had taught them when he was their pastor. It was evident that the Žižkov II congregation has chosen a fine pastor with some extraordinary talents.

On October 24, Kliment Church in Prague 2 was the site of a service of ordination for five women and one man who have completed their vicariates (pastoral internships) and are beginning to serve ECCB congregations. The pristine sanctuary of this lovely church was filled to capacity as the ordinands took the vows of ordination, experienced the laying on of hands, and were welcomed by clergy colleagues who came to the chancel area to be part of the ritual. Prior to that ceremony, one of the ordinands delivered a thought-provoking sermon on God's command for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. That young man may have been anticipating the rigors of ministry when he concluded that if we submit to God's appeal for us to give up the very promise that has the potential to fulfill our lives, a sacrificial lamb will be provided us.

After words of welcome, challenge, and encouragement were offered by a variety of respected church leaders, the service concluded with a prayer offered by three young people who are also anticipating ordination. This service was also augmented by festive organ music, joyful congregational singing, and warm guitar strumming, and was followed by an opportunity for everyone to greet the ordinands on the church lawn, as well as at a reception that was held in an adjacent hall. The entire event was a wonderful celebration of faithful devotion.

On October 28, John and I were privileged to attend a special commemoration of the heritage of the Unity of Brethren that was held in the village of Kunwald, which is located in a remote corner of Moravia. That event began with a speech about John Amos Comenius who was the last bishop of the Unity of Brethren before they were forced into exile by Catholic authorities in 1621. In that address, the mayor of Kunwald stressed that Comenius and the Unity of Brethren handed down a valuable legacy of love, peace, and justice that has endured to this very day. Greetings were extended by the regional commissioner who helped secure governmental funds for the production of a video about the history of the Unity of Brethren, which was the focus of the day's festivities. After the video was premiered, Miroslav Brož, a venerated leader emeritus of the ECCB, reflected on the history of the Unity of Brethren who faithfully nurtured the traditions of the Czech Reformation during times of oppression and carried that legacy to the farthest corners of the earth. The afternoon climaxed with a concert given by a folksinger who uncovered Comenius' musical version of the Psalms while he himself was in exile in the Netherlands during the communist era. I cannot imagine a more meaningful and authentic way to celebrate the national holiday which is observed each year on October 28 to commemorate the formation of the Republic of Czechoslovakia.

Bridges - On the Protestant Theological Faculty

If this update were not so late in arriving, it would be dated November 2004 because that is when the events that it describes took place. However, I did not want to prepare this edition of *Bridges* until we had attained written confirmation of the new configuration of the Czech Working Group, which was established when the CWG met in Louisville on November 8-9, 2004. Having now received an "official" statement about that matter, I am pleased to be able to tell you that the network's new name reflects a significant shift in the manner in which people who are interested in fostering connections between the ECCB and the PC(USA) will be linked, so that an optimal sharing of insights, resources, and opportunities may occur. The specific nature of this shift will be spelled out in detail in the next addition of the "Czech Mission Network News," whose preparation has been delayed by staffing changes in the ECCB's Ecumenical Department. Now that the backlog resulting from much work for few people has abated, the foundational Czech portion of the newsletter has been sent to the printer, and the "Czech Mission Network News" is the final stages of preparation. However, lest this informative digression detract from this update's focus on the Protestant Theological Faculty, let me turn to that topic without further ado!

Since 1999, an association called the "Friends of the Faculty" has gathered at the seminary each autumn to unite people from a variety of nations who have studied or taught at the Faculty with the present generation of teachers, staff, and students. The history of the Faculty, confessional issues, and theological perspectives on war are among themes that have been considered at these assemblies on other occasions. However, this year's gathering began with an especially meaningful commemoration of Faculty's 85th anniversary. On the evening of November 19, the Faculty's large lecture hall was filled with people who had come to recognize the faithful service of a number of the seminary's professors and staff members. After an opening hymn, Dean Filipi gave an introductory address, and the rector of Charles University presented university medals to several illustrious people. After a choral interlude, faculty medals were awarded to other special people whose creativity, warmth, humility, and integrity embody the spirit of this esteemed institution. Additional choral selections set the stage for greetings that were offered by representatives from Charles University's Catholic and Hussite Faculties, as well as by educators from neighboring countries. Good humor and respect characterized the entire event, which was followed by a festive banquet and warm camaraderie.

Some of you probably know several of the persons who were honored that evening, but I suspect that many of you are acquainted with Pavel Smetana, the former moderator of the ECCB; Vera Fritzová, who has devoted her professional career to the Faculty's International Studies Program; and Jakub Trojan, who continues to inspire students and colleagues alike with his profound insights into thorny theological and ethical issues. Thus, it may be appropriate to cite a recent interview regarding the Kingdom of God in which Professor Trojan said: "When I want to illustrate the eschatological perspective to our students, this example is helpful. A couple is expecting a baby and are making a lot of preparations. The child is present in their conversations and in their expectations. The baby is not here, but nevertheless, it has entered their lives; it is not here, but, nevertheless, it is at work more than any system that is here. That is how we must understand ...the coming of the kingdom of God." (Interview by Petr Veber, printed in *Ceský Bratr*, Vol. 80, #16, 2004, p.16. translated by Joyce Michael.)

On November 24, two large groups of students who were privy to such illustrative images during their time at the Faculty received baccalaureate and masters degrees at graduation exercises that were held at the university's Carolinum. Among this year's graduates was Alena Zikmundová, who began her higher education in the United States during the 1940s when her father, J.L. Hromadka, was a professor at Princeton. Mrs. Zikmundová's fulfillment of a life-long dream provides an inspiring example of the way in which the Faculty fosters opportunities for life-long learning and faithful seeking, reminiscent of the emphases of J. A. Comenius, whose name was borne by Faculty for many years and who also knew what it means to say that "the kingdom of God is not here, but, nevertheless, it is at work."

Joyce Michael

Bridges - Agents of peace

As you may know, December 6 is a special date in this part of the world because it is the "name day" of sv. Mikulaš (alias St. Nicholas). In keeping with tradition, on the evening of December 5, sv. Mikulaš appears in many different places, accompanied by the angel and devil who are his cronies. This trio greets children with questions about their behavior and with sweet treats that are often carried in little baskets. It is a charming tradition, which was particularly enjoyable this year because "Mikulaš Eve" occurred on Sunday. After a Christmas musical presented by the youth of the church that we attend in Prague 6, Mikulaš appeared, and the younger children displayed an enchanting innocence and joy as they accepted the treats that he offered them. Later that afternoon, John and I found ourselves walking behind a teenaged angel and devil who clearly were enjoying the opportunity to masquerade as agents of goodness and mischief (which seems to be the role that the devil often plays in Czech folktales.) As I contrasted this gentle scene with news footage depicting the violence and conflict that are typical in so many places, I found myself wishing that the entire world could be serene and safe enough to enjoy such winsome traditions. "Let there be peace on earth" seemed to be an appropriate, and necessary, Advent prayer, which came to life in a most amazing way less than 24 hours later.

John and I had been asked to escort a representative from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) to an ecumenical worship service at the "military church" of St. John of Nepomuk near Prague Castle. That mission worker was in town because the ECCB, which resulted from a union of Reformed and Lutheran churches, recently became a member of the World Lutheran Federation. I was looking forward to the evening, but I was curious about what a worship service hosted by army chaplains would be like. I did not know what to expect. However, insofar as the military chaplaincy was one of the first ecumenical pursuits which Czech Catholic priests and Protestant ministers undertook together, I was anticipating a rich blend of traditions.

I was not disappointed, as organ music filled the sanctuary, a beloved hymn was sung, Scripture was read, and a prayer for peace was offered. Following an orchestral interlude, some special guests from Britain were introduced, and, in an instant, it became apparent that this was an extraordinary occasion. You see, the Czech military chaplaincy had been selected for membership in the "Community of the Cross of Nails." That network of advocates of peace and reconciliation arose as the result of a vision that came to a caretaker of the Cathedral Church of St. Michael in Coventry, England, after it was destroyed during a bombing raid carried out by German forces during the Second World War.

That caretaker had made crosses from the nails that he had found in the ruins of the Church of St. Michael in the belief that that these symbols of Christ's solidarity with all who suffer had real potential to call the world to engage in the sort of forgiveness that often is an essential component of peace.

The British representatives who presented the chaplains of the Czech army with the Cross of Nails stated that this was the first time that a military body had received this honor and its accompanying responsibility to be mediators of peace. In a corner of my mind, a question arose: Had the Czech military chaplaincy received the Cross of Nails because it had advanced a spirit of reconciliation and cooperation between Catholic and Protestant clergy, in spite of centuries of alienation between the agents of the Czech Reformation and the perpetrators of the violent Counter-Reformation?

I do not know if that theory is credible. However, when our guest from the ELCA raised the same question during the reception at the Archbishop's Palace that followed the service, I remembered that a few days before, I had heard a top military official repeatedly speaking of peace during an interview on the Czech morning news. A new theory presented itself: Would not members of an army that sees itself as being an instrument of peace be invaluable participants in the Cross of Nails' community of reconciliation? Is not such a self-perception the exception, rather than the rule, in military circles at this point in time? And isn't such a radical re-visioning of the role of military power essential, if this world is to be serene and safe enough to enjoy winsome traditions of life and love? Let there be peace on earth, indeed!

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