

**Bridges 2005**

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## **Bridges - A reconciling beginning**

During the final days of 2004 and the beginning of 2005, the vital faith of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren (ECCB) radiated from television screens that were turned to Czech TV 2, whose high-quality programming makes it one of the most watched stations in the nation. For example, TV listings indicated that, on December 24, Joel Ruml, the moderator of the ECCB, would be presenting a Christmas meditation prior to the screening of a movie about Pope John XXIII. People who happened upon that broadcast had a rare opportunity to experience the interface between the promise of faith and the realities of life. After carefully lighting a candle, Rev. Ruml began his reflections while seated at a table in an office setting. However, a few minutes later, the scene shifted, and Rev. Ruml was standing in the midst of a bustling Prague Christmas market, speaking about the need that human beings have for hope and love. Rev. Ruml then moved from the market to the banks of the Vltava River where he continued his thoughtful reflections. Subsequent segments of the meditation moved between these three locations, seamlessly and beautifully, inviting viewers into the mystery of the incarnation in a way that was accessible and compelling. The care that went into producing that broadcast suggests that this extremely “secular” society has great respect for, and openness to, the Christmas assurance that God has come to be with us, whether we are basking in candlelight, scurrying through the market, or standing at the water’s edge.

On January 7, St. Vitus Cathedral at Prague Castle was the site of an ecumenical worship service in which the tsunami victims were memorialized. The Reverend Pavel Cerný, president of the Czech Ecumenical Council of Churches, and Cardinal Miroslav Vlk of the Roman Catholic Church played key roles in this service, which concluded with a choral anthem, during which the assembled worshipers stood in tribute to all who have died and in prayer for all who remain at risk in Southeast Asia. Leading representatives of the Czech Church and the Czech government were joined by a number of concerned citizens for this moving event.

These were both inspiring events; however, the ecumenical service that has given rise to the title of this issue of *Bridges* was broadcast from the Protestant Salvatore Church on the evening of January 1. Prior to the start of the service, Miloš Rejchrt, the ECCB pastor of that congregation, was joined by a young woman who recounted the religious history of the region and of the Salvatore Church. In light of the tumultuous events that followed the Czech Reformation and characterized the Counter-Reformation, the service was focused on love—for fellow Christians, for tsunami victims, and for the world. Leaders of the Roman Catholic Church, the Hussite Church, and the ECCB were joined by the heads of the Silesian Lutheran, Orthodox, Old Catholic, and United Methodist Churches in reflecting on what it means to live in love. Between each of these meditations, a series of candles were lit and prayers were offered by individuals, couples, and children, representing other denominations, such as the Apostolic, Seventh Day Adventist, and Baptist Churches. These segments were linked by consecutive movements of a powerful, contemporary setting of the Mass that drew on a variety of languages and theological traditions. From the solemn chiming of the concert bells with which the service began, through Rev. Rejchrt’s sensitive narration of the oratorio, to the final words of benediction, the service was permeated by a spirit of reconciliation and grace. It was clear that, in spite of painful histories and occasional tensions, the Christian churches of this nation share a deep commitment to that which is gracious, good, loving, and uniting! As Rev. Rejchrt so powerfully proclaimed during a particularly meaningful part of the Mass: “The light shines and is shining.” May it be so throughout our fractured world.

Joyce Michael

## **Bridges - Romanies in Czech Church and Society**

The Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren has traditionally expected the Diaconia, the benevolence arm of the church, to provide assistance to the needy. A major project of the Diaconia is to help the Roma (also known as gypsies) become more integrated into the general society. The Premysl Pitter Centre in Rokycany invites Romany children to join their activities. They are gradually overcoming the worries parents often have when the children are mixed together in programs and activities. The Romany children are easily converted to Christianity but quickly drop away because the Gospel isn't presented in their own cultural understandings.

There is also a difference of perspective between the "mainstream" Czech Christians and the Romanies themselves. At a seminar held during the Fifth Romany Christian Conference, Ruena Cerna, leader of the Czech Ecumenical Council of Churches Commission for Work with Romanies observed, "The Romanies did not talk about their dire social situation, nor did they complain that they were discriminated against, but simply prayed together, prayed for a blessing on each other and on the Czech nation. They prayed for Romany preachers, and for the strength to pass on what they had come to believe in, to win over other members of their family, and to lead them to a new life."

Dialogue with the Czechs, as they struggle to bring together majority Czech Christians and minority Romany Christians, could help us all learn more about peaceful ways to live together in an increasingly diverse cultural world. I am hoping our Presbytery of Scioto Valley Mission Tour can talk together about this work when we visit Prague in May.

The summary of the Roma concerns are gleaned from the recent issue of the Czech Mission Network News. A complete copy can be ordered from the Middle East and Europe Office of the Presbyterian Church USA.

## **Bridges - Beyond Damnation**

In recent days, the congregations of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren have faithfully relived the events of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, White Saturday, Easter Sunday, and Easter Monday. Furthermore, the entire denomination is busily preparing for the international, interdenominational “Gathering of Christians” that will be held in Prague the first weekend in June. Thus, I expected that this update would consist of short reports related to those topics. However, some experiences that I had in mid-March seem to be clamoring for expression. Thus, I hope that you will not mind if I adopt a rather reflective tone in this message.

On March 12, I was walking through Jungmannova Square when an elderly man looked directly at me and said, “The adults are going to hell.” I was surprised, both by the words and by the fact that I had understood this unusual Czech sentence without any contextual clues. However, looking about, I saw a group of young adults with several dogs gathered around a bench, playing recorders and engaging in quiet banter. Had the man been referring to these folks who appear to be homeless and who periodically turn up in historic squares throughout the center of the city? Even as that question surfaced, I decided to retrace my steps so that I could wander through the Easter market, which had just been set up in Wenceslas Square.

When I returned to Jungmannova Square a little later, the same man walked by me and said, “Everything! To hell!” I was struck by the force of this word of condemnation, which almost seemed to be addressed to me personally, since the young people had left the square by then.

Being aware of the troubling realities that many people regularly face, I could not easily dismiss the old man’s analysis. Thus, his dark prophecy remained with me for several days, before being counterbalanced by the pre-Easter worship service that the Protestant Theological Faculty held at the Church of St. Martin-in-the-Wall on March 15. A few days before that eucharistic gathering, Professor Jakub Trojan had described his sermon to me, so I was well-prepared to hear him remind us that Jesus’ death occurred in an unclean place far from the purity of the temple and beyond the protective walls of the city. However, I was challenged to move beyond my self-centered preoccupations when Professor Trojan declared that we are similarly called to go beyond the protective walls of the church into the secular world where people are hungry, hurting, and seeking.

The emphasis of the evening was on serving—beyond the comforting warmth of the church. Yet, I was touched by the gentle spirit of the Communion service, and by the graceful greetings that were extended to me by Vera Fritzová, Peter Stephens, and Professor Trojan following the service. It seemed to me that the worshipers lingered longer in the sanctuary and just outside of the church than has been the case other years, perhaps because the challenge of the sermon was also an exceptionally graceful reminder that when any of us feel as if we are on the outside of the hope and promise of the church, we may be exactly where the crucified and resurrected One is waiting to extend the gift of unconditional acceptance.

Of course, the emphasis of the worship service at Martin-in-the-Wall was on serving beyond the comforting warmth of the church. Thus, I hardly know what to make of the fact that when a man approached me with what I thought would be a request for money at the tram stop a few minutes later, I moved away without a reply. It was dark, I was alone, and I never know how to best respond to such solicitations. However, leaving those excuses aside, I have concluded that we dare not shy away from engaging the secular world—with its homeless youth and despairing oldsters. Indeed, I am persuaded that such realities must be embraced if the word of damnation that greeted me in Jungmannova Square is to be transformed by a dynamic embodiment of the declaration that “Christ is risen.” It may well be that life’s victory over darkness and death will become a tangible reality on earth only as our neighbors in the world become the recipients of genuine acts of grace and incidences of love. May it be so!

## Bridges - The Czech church: not dead yet

The following article is from the [Prague Post online \(in English\)](#) reporting [The Czech church: Not dead yet, 19 percent of Czechs believe that God exists](#) ([printer-friendly version](#))

*19 percent of Czechs believe that God exists*

October 05, 2005

By Nate and Leah Seppanen Anderson



Czechs are famously agnostic. When we asked Jiri, a middle-aged Czech, if there would be any celebrations associated with a recent saint's day, his reply was, "Of course not. There are no Christians in the Czech Republic."

Common wisdom has it that alcoholics outnumber practicing Christians and that more Czechs believe in UFOs than in God — and common wisdom may be correct. Census data from 1991 and 2001 show that in the decade after communism, the number of self-professed atheists rose from 40 percent to 60 percent, one of the highest percentages in the world. A recent European Union survey shows that only 19 percent of Czechs believe that God exists. But the story is more complicated than these numbers suggest.

Magda, a twentysomething Czech friend, expressed frustration with comments like Jiri's. "Just because we Christians are small in numbers doesn't mean we don't exist," she said. There's more than Magda's own personal experience to back this up. During the process of researching a magazine article on Christianity in post-communist Europe, we stumbled on a surprising fact. Even as church attendance and belief in God have plummeted in the Czech Republic, small evangelical congregations across the country are not just holding steady but are actually gaining members. And these members tend to be young Czechs, members of the first generation now coming of age that never knew life under socialism.

The number of evangelicals — who take the Bible's authority seriously, focus on the person of Jesus, stress outreach and service and often point to a distinct conversion experience — grew throughout the 1990s. The Apostolic Church (Apostolská církev) and the Brethren Church (Církev bratrská) tripled their numbers, for instance, while most other evangelical churches grew at a slower rate.

This is even more remarkable when you compare evangelical groups to the more established churches. During the 1990s, census data showed that the Catholic Church lost one-third of its members. Accusations and revelations about StB involvement didn't help matters. Neither did battles over property restitution, only now showing signs of potential resolution. And it wasn't just the Catholics: the Czech Brethren (Ceskobratrská církev evangelická), the Czech Hussites (Církev ceskoslovenská husitská) and the Silesian Lutherans (Slezská evangelická církev a.v.) all saw drops of nearly 50 percent. Only the evangelicals continued to grow.

We tracked down evangelical leaders and attended Sunday services here in Prague to gauge the strength of the movement. What we found was a powerful sense of optimism. Though Czech society has become post-Christian, evangelicals see this lack of belief as an opportunity. Jiri Unger heads the Evangelical Alliance in the Czech Republic. He calls it a "privilege" to serve in such an atheistic society. "It's a real nice challenge because you can influence so much," he told us. "So many things are beginning."

James Krikava, an American Lutheran missionary, finished his 15 years of service in the country in June and has fully turned operations over to the local congregations he helped to found. Looking back on his work in Prague and Plzen, Krikava radiated the same excitement. "[At] my church in Plzen, I think there's one adult that I didn't baptize," he said. "These are all people who came from atheism into the faith and that is real mission work."

Membership remains small at about 1 percent of the population. Like all churches, evangelical congregations hoped for greater results in the heady days after 1989, but the smaller numbers have proven to be a strange kind of blessing. Communist repression had turned evangelical churches inward and they became incapable of receiving an influx of new Christians right away. Unger calls this a "ghetto

mentality" that took time to overcome. "We were a ghetto that had to preserve Christianity," he says, "but we lost a vision for society, how to equip Christians outside the congregation or its meetings. A major goal is to enlarge the vision of the church, because the church is still suspicious of everything public."

So the 1990s became a decade of experimentation and development as evangelicals expanded their mission and church structures and tried to reach out in new ways. Rudolf Brancovsky is a 24-year old painter and sculptor here in Prague, and one of the new generation of Christian artists and students who are influencing the church. He moonlights as the lead singer and songwriter for the band Veselá Zubatá (The Merry Grim Reaper). The group sings honestly about faith and the church, and is often critical of the Christian subculture that has developed in the country. "Jesus changed water into wine; Christians tend to turn it back into water," Brancovsky told us one afternoon in his studio. This attitude has fueled experimentation and a willingness to try new things.

Churches now partner with congregations in Ireland, the UK and the United States to put on summer English camps with an evangelistic focus. They have adopted praise choruses in addition to time-tested hymns. They have launched youth groups and started counseling programs.

Dear Friends,

I am glad you are so interested in what is happening here in the Czech Republic. The Prague Post is a good source of information. However, the article in question may not be very accurate. The people I talked with in the ECCB's church office did not know of the poll on which the article is based.

In addition to wondering how the information was gathered and what questions were asked, they point out that the figures don't seem to be accurate. (For example, other data points to church membership of 33% of the population. The article stated that only 19% of Czechs believe in God.) The declines in the mainline churches, while substantial, appear to be overstated in the article. Additionally, different denominations use different criteria for compiling their membership statistics.

Sorry. I wish I could endorse this article, but the reservations of staff of our partner church here make that impossible.

John Michael  
PC(USA) Mission Co-worker,  
Czech Republic

The results can be seen in the pews; young believers and families now fill 545 evangelical congregations. Through organizations like the Evangelical Alliance, cooperation among denominations is up. Higher-quality Christian presses now publish more resources for Christians and churches, books including Czech Bibles and translations of well-known Western authors such as Philip Yancey. Support organizations such as the new counseling ministry Parakletos are up and running.

Christianity, long assumed to be dying here, lives on — but much of that life takes place away from the obvious medieval churches and baroque monasteries that saturate Prague. And Czech culture, it turns out, is not as hostile to religious messages as is often claimed. The same Eurobarometer survey that put belief in God at 19 percent showed that half of all Czechs harbor a belief in "some sort of spirit or life force," often referred to as necismus (somethingism). Though disillusioned with traditional religion, Czechs are open to a new way forward, and a growing number of evangelicals are trying to show it to them.

— Leah Seppanen Anderson is an American political scientist who studies the Czech Republic. Her husband Nate is a freelance writer. They live near Chicago.

## Bridges - Web Spinning

From time to time, I have heard people use the phrase “oh, what a tangled web we weave” to introduce a classical truism about duplicity. However, when actual spider-webs capture rays of sunlight, it is clear that the most natural and useful sorts webs are composed of intricate patterns that have been constructed with care and creativity. Thus, I am glad to report that the image of a “tangled web” was supplanted by a tantalizing image of a multifarious, but supple, web when the “American Working Group” met in Prague on April 25.

Webs had already begun to spin before that meeting took place. You see, this special gathering of the “American Working Group” was set up in response to an e-mail that arrived just prior to its regular March meeting. In that message, Roger Shoemaker, who has assumed a central role in the steering committee of the newly established Czech Mission Network, indicated that he and his wife, Sue, would like to meet with the “American Working Group” during a visit to Prague in April.

At that time, we had no idea that another Presbyterian couple with significant Czech connections would be in Prague during the same period. However, in mid-April, Ondřej Stělik – a gifted Czech pastor who moved to the USA to serve a congregation in Binghamton, New York three years ago – put John in touch with some important leaders from his congregation who were preparing to come to Prague to formalize a long-standing relationship between the University of Rochester and the Czech Technical University. Thus, we were delighted to be able to welcome Roger and Gloria Westgate to a very special session of the “Working Group” that Ondřej had chaired at the time of its formation over ten years ago. These auspicious coincidences suggest that webs were already spinning, independently of our efforts, long before April 25.

Yet, simultaneously, several people in various places were directly involved in web-weaving as they nurtured potential contacts with care. Thus, the practicalities involved in discovering and fostering existing ties were a focal point of the discussion that occurred when Jan Dus (the Chairperson of the American Working Group), John, Roger, Sue, and I enjoyed a working lunch together on April 25. As we

considered the intricacies of trans-Atlantic communication, it was exciting to anticipate the connections that will be enabled by the Czech Mission Network’s new website. Yet, it was also encouraging to learn that this technological instrument is not viewed as being an end in itself, but instead, is designed to facilitate the formation of living relationships between actual human beings who have an interest in the faithful people who compose the ECCB.

Throughout the lunch hour and the meeting that followed, an amazing number of connections came to light. And, as the members of the “American Working Group” reported on relationships which presently exist between Presbyterians in the U.S.A. and the Protestant Theological Faculty, the Diaconia, and congregations of the ECCB, tangible ideas about ways to develop and foster those ties began to suggest themselves. Thus, the Shoemakers left the meeting with several pages of notes that may guide them as they seek to link the ‘Czech-American webs’ that are already spinning independently, but vitally, in many places.

I left the meeting with a genuine sense of enthusiasm that I wanted to pass along to you. However, the intricate designs and paradoxical dynamics of webs cannot be easily converted into words. Nevertheless, I want to conclude these reflections with a recollection that Sue Shoemaker shared about an encounter which she and Roger had when visiting a village in Moravia several years ago. Near the end of an evening gathering which was attended by over twenty people, a quiet young man expressed gratitude that he had been able to meet some Americans who are not like television serials and movies. ‘That is what it is all about,’ Sue thoughtfully said, ‘replacing images of Dallas and hamburgers with relationships among real people.’ From my perspective, the Czech Mission Network is exactly that: a means of bringing real people with real commitment into a beautiful web of relationships. If you would like to become part of this pattern, please send a note to me at the address that is listed in the cover e-mail, and I will make sure that Roger and the Network steering committee know of your interest. Thank you for choosing to be involved in helping us create a magnificent web together!

## **Bridges - Revitalizing Church and Preserving Culture**

In May, John and I had occasion visit the building which houses the Vinohrady congregation of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren on two occasions which, on the face of it, may seem to be fundamentally different, but which, on a deeper level, may be vitally related.

The Vinohrady building – whose walls are adorned with striking paintings by Miroslav Ráda, whose artwork gives compelling expression to the contemporary significance of biblical stories – is the location of the ECCB's equivalent of the General Assembly. Thus, John and I made our way there on a cool Friday evening to attend a special session that was focused on “building up congregations” or, in American parlance, on “church revitalization.”

Moderator Ruml and Lay Moderator Čejková had already told me a bit about the direction that this conversation might take. Thus, I was anticipating that a lively discussion of the practical forms that a new, more equalitarian relationship between pastors and lay leaders might take. However, the dialogue, which unfolded after the few moments of polite silence that followed introductory remarks, was more impassioned and varied than I had expected. Indeed, a comprehensive report that had been prepared by a special task force elicited many comments about a wide-range of topics, many of which are also of concern to churches in western Europe and America.

Particular attention was given to the different needs of city congregations, which are thriving, and village congregations, which are in decline. heartfelt affirmations of the worth that all congregations have for their participants led me to conclude that churches must be nurtured in very individual ways that take account of their unique qualities, their specific needs, their particular potentials. It seems to me that when it comes to building up churches, patterns may be proposed, but it may never be assumed that ‘one size fits all.’ Thus, it may be that the discussion of church revitalization at this year's Synod (i.e., GA) did not give rise to a blueprint for maximizing the potential of ECCB congregations and for dealing with the thorny question of how the church can move toward independence from state support. Yet, I was heartened by the respectful and direct ways in which a number of difficult questions were explored on the evening of May 20.

A few days later, John and I returned to the Vinohrady Church for a mid-week concert and lecture that had been organized by the International Dvořák society. The musical portion of the program featured a renowned pianist who had presented a fascinating program on Dvořák's piano music at the church which we attend in Prague 6 just days before he was the featured soloist at a major concert at the Rudolfinum. At the Vinohrady concert, Mr. Kvapil was joined by a baritone soloist who sang Dvořák's Biblical Songs, American spirituals, and other classic American tunes.

This rousing performance was complemented by a question-generated description of “little known” features of life in the United States, which was presented by a Czech woman who had spent a number of years in the American academic and professional community. Her informative, good-humored remarks addressed hard questions about American customs, practices, and perspectives in ways that went beyond stereotypic generalizations to issue in a fair, but honest, portrayal of life in the USA.

After the concert, we were greeted by a number of friends from various congregations in Prague, and I had a strong sense that the church had effectively fulfilled the role of preserving culture that evening. In the metropolis of Prague, that role is fulfilled by many secular institutions as well, while in rural settings, the church may serve as a unique mediator of cultural opportunities. However, it has been my experience that even in the big city, cultural events organized by churches are characterized by distinctive qualities of warmth, intimacy and community. Thus, it seems to me that a powerful tool for church revitalization is already in place in Protestant congregations that serve as transmitters of culture. The church may be particularly alive, inviting, and visionary whenever it provides occasions for people to come together in harmony to receive gifts of beauty, creativity, and contemplation that are ours by the grace of God.

## **Bridges - A Grand Opening**

(prepared on behalf of the Czech & American Mission Networks by Joyce Michael, mission co-worker w PC(USA))

In the autumn of 2003, I was privileged to accompany Gerhard Frey-Reininghaus to the opening of an Alzheimer's unit at a nursing home in the community of Dvoře Kralové nad Labem. The ECCB congregation which founded that diaconal center was also celebrating a landmark anniversary that day. Thus, it was an especially joyful occasion, which was well complemented by the hospitable care that was extended to Gerhard and me as we dined with church leaders who welcomed us into their home and introduced us to their historic community. Of course, as I try to recall that day so long after the fact, a variety of half-memories are puzzling me.

However, one recollection remains as clear this evening as it was in 2003. In my life-time, I have visited many nursing homes as a pastor and as a friend. However, the care center at Dvoře Kralové was unlike any other that I have experienced. Not because of its architecture, although that was distinctively creative. Nor because of its furnishings, although those were cheerful and practical at the same time. But because of the exceptionally loving, gentle, and human way in which the caregivers and the residents interacted with one another. Smiles were genuine and gestures were warm, as aides guided the residents through the clusters of quests who had come to see their home. Trust was evident, and serenity was palpable as residents sat at tables in the common area, looking quite tranquil in spite of the unusual festivities that were taking place. The signs of bewilderment and despair which are often evident in nursing homes and Alzheimer's units were scarcely visible. Perhaps there is a different approach to aging here, I thought, although I could not begin to pinpoint what that divergence might be.

However, this spring, I began to identify the foundation of the graceful spirit which was evident at opening of the Alzheimer's unit in Dvoře Kralové in 2003 and at the dedication of the hospice in Valašské Meziříčí in 2004. The occasion for this intuition was the grand opening of a photography exhibit on aging which the ECCB's Diaconia prepared this spring. Having never been to such an event, I hardly knew what to expect. However, soon after John and I entered the room in the Franciscan monastery where the ceremonies were held, I felt myself being immersed in the theme of the exhibit as a variety of media were employed to give expression to its underlying premise.

Of course, the staff of the Diaconia used words to remind us that aging does not mean that we become any less human than we have ever been. However, this message was reinforced by haunting musical selections performed by a young woman whose lyrics invited us into the experience of aging. Photographers were introduced, and at least one person who appeared in some of the photographs was greeted. Video clips were shown, and the "author" of the exhibit was honored. Refreshments were enjoyed, and then, John and I began to look at the pictures themselves.

The title of the exhibit, "I Am Still Me," came to life in tangible ways as camera lens recorded normal scenes of everyday life. The title was more than a thematic device; it was an invitation for all of us, young and old alike, to recognize and honor the human being who resides behind wrinkled brows, weary bodies, deliberate movements, and pained expressions. The theme filled me with poignant hope as I looked at the likeness of an elderly lady pouring milk for her cat, and smiled at an elderly couple dancing in their kitchen, and entered into the tender beauty of great-grandparents gently cradling the youngest generation of their families. Life has beauty in, and at, any age.

"I am still me!" The photos of that exhibit reflected the same value of the human being that I had observed in Dvoře Kralové and Valašské Meziříčí, and that recognition and affirmation of the essential worth of every life may make all the difference in the world for elderly people who are in a position to receive our care and for those of us who are open to receiving and embracing their love.

## **Bridges - An Inviting 'Impuls'**

(prepared on behalf of the Czech & American Mission Networks by Joyce Michael, mission co-worker with PC(USA))

In the spring, I received a message regarding the March BRIDGES, which gave rise to an exciting chain of events. Louise Davidson, the author of that response, is involved in a pilot project designed to establish long-term relationships between local units of Presbyterian Women and women's groups in partner churches around the world. Louise wanted to know if I was aware of a group of women in an ECCB congregation that might be interested in participating in this program.

When I mentioned this possibility to the American Working Group, Naděje Mandysová invited me to describe this opportunity to the Czech Ecumenical Forum of Christian Women, which she had established when she was the director of the Czech Ecumenical Council of Churches. Thus, on June 1, I had the honor of participating in the spring meeting of the Forum, which expressed strong interest in establishing a partnership with a similar body in the USA. Since the Ecumenical Forum is not related to a single ECCB congregation, the institution of such a relationship lies beyond the scope of the present pilot project. However, we hope that in time, Presbyterian Women will be able to facilitate a relationship with an ecumenical body in the USA. You see, the Forum has made such a relationship a "priority" because its members believe that their ecumenical character gives them a unique quality that is worth sharing with women in other places! Perhaps, you will catch a glimpse of this quality as I describe the sense of excitement that grew within me during my first encounter with this group.

I was delighted to learn that although many of the Forum's participants are members of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, a number of Catholic women and smaller contingents from Hussite, Baptist, Seventh Day Adventist, and Silesian Lutheran Churches are also involved in this organization. The collegiality of women from the ECCB and Catholic confessions is particularly significant in this land where the painful events which occurred during the Hussite era and the ensuing Counter-reformation continue to exert a subtle influence on the larger society's perceptions of Christianity. Likewise, another important feature of the Forum is its multi-generationality. Although I was told that the daytime scheduling of its meetings means that younger, working women are prohibited from attending, it appeared to me that a variety of ages (and socio-economic classes) were represented.

However, above all, I was impressed by the attentive enthusiasm with which the thirty+ women in attendance responded to a thought-provoking Bible study on Philippians 3:1-14, which was identified as being an apt "impuls" (i.e., motivation or impetus) for the Forum's commitment to forming a partnership with a women's group from the USA. Similar depth was evident in the Forum's discussion of the insightful reflections that Mahulena Čejková, the ECCB's lay moderator, offered on how the church views the world and how the world views the church. As the day went on, it was clear that every woman present had come prepared to make an active contribution, and that each speaker was nurtured with respect and care, even when opinions differed. The discussions that took place were the antithesis of superficial chat, and the depth of sharing convinced me that the Ecumenical Forum is a unique fellowship where honesty and support go hand in hand.

This sense was confirmed during the lunch hour when I was able to "converse" with women who dared to seek me out, although their English is as limited as my spoken Czech is. During this informal period, various women told me of their appreciation for this group where individual members listen without claiming that anyone has the final answer and accept one another with unconditional receptivity. I felt as if I had been transported in time and space to lively and warm gatherings of Christian women that I have experienced in American churches as well. I had a strong sense of having found a new community of thoughtful colleagues, and I was invigorated by the creativity, energy, and grace that characterized the meeting on June 1. Thus, I am honored to introduce the Ecumenical Forum to you, even as I hope that this little account will give you an 'impuls' to celebrate and nurture similar groups within your own congregation.

## Bridges - Living Close to the Source

(prepared on behalf of the Czech & American Mission Networks by Joyce Michael, mission co-worker with PC(USA))

Occasionally, I have an opportunity to watch a whimsical Czech documentary which begins with a gentle tune about journeying to find the source of one or other of the various streams that wind their way through this country. [And,] this morning, I can almost hear the melody and lyrics of that ballad as I start to write this Bridges, which may give us occasion to consider what it means to seek for, and to live close to, the source of our heritage and of our being.

Ostensibly, this story begins on a Sunday morning in June, when the pastor told us of an untimely death which would have far-reaching significance for persons in our Prague 6 congregation, for the Protestant Theological Faculty, for an ECCB congregation in the community of Kladno, and for many other folks in a variety of places. Dr. Daniel Alexander Neval had died of a heart-attack on June 3 at the age of thirty-five. Prior to that morning, I had not known that Daniel's fiancé was the daughter of the member of the Prague 6 congregation who had accompanied me to the meeting of the Ecumenical Forum of Christian women just days before and who has extended particular kindness to me on many other occasions.

However, it was clear that Daniel's future mother-in-law was heart-broken at his premature death, and it was evident that many other people were also deeply touched. A similar sense of loss was palpable the next evening, as John and I joined a number of dear friends at the Church of St. Martin-in-the-Wall to attend a memorial service that had been prepared by Daniel's fiancé and the Faculty's International Department.

During that service, the outlines of Daniel's contributions to the Czech Republic began to emerge. As Dean Pavel Filipi spoke, I recalled the energetic manner in which Daniel had participated in the life of the Protestant Theological Faculty. Not only had he pursued doctoral studies in conjunction with that institution, he had also been instrumental in founding and leading the association of international alumni that assembles in Prague each autumn under the name, "Friends of the Faculty." As the Reverend Pavel Smetana spoke, I learned that Daniel had been quite involved in the reconciling pursuits of the Czech Ecumenical Council of Churches. [And,] as Professor Dagmar Čapková spoke, I was moved to consider the whole-hearted manner in which Daniel had committed himself to translating Comenius' writings into German and to studying that important thinker's life and works until he arrived at the ground-breaking insights which distinguish his Ph.D. dissertation. Other speakers reminded us of Daniel's compassionate ways of relating to ordinary people and of caring for his Kladno congregation. Yet, my fragmentary recollections of the service at St. Martin-in-the-Wall are only part of the story.

I had long known that Daniel had grown up and studied in Switzerland. However, I only recently learned that his grandfather was a Protestant pastor in the Czech lands before his mother and father emigrated to a nation where they could offer their family a life characterized by possibility rather than poverty and freedom rather than oppression. Nevertheless, Daniel felt drawn to return to the heritage of faith that his grandfather had preserved. Thus, he came to the Czech Republic, immersed himself in its language and culture, and carried on Comenius' legacy through his scholarship and service to the church. He dared to set forth on the difficult, but fulfilling, journey that was required to return to the source of his faith and to recover the roots of his ancestry.

As I consider Daniel's story, I cannot help but recall that it was Comenius' life-long desire to return to the land from which he was exiled as a result of Counter-reformation measures. In contrast, Daniel Alexander Neval was able to return 'home' and to live close to the source of his spiritual heritage. Thus, his short life was rich and full, and may be an apt invitation for us to take Comenius' words to heart: 'To enter into friendship with a dear one is an act which death cannot disrupt, because the spiritual friendship which unites our hearts in God is more than that which rests in the body.\*' May it be so!

\*This paraphrased 'translation' of Comenius' words is intuitive rather than literal.

## **BRIDGES - "Where is the Life?"**

prepared on behalf of ECCB's American Working Group & PC(USA)'s Czech Mission Network by Joyce Michael

Interesting conclusions are frequently drawn by people from the United States when they hear that following North Korea, the Czech Republic is the second most atheistic country in the world. That acknowledgment often leads people to assume that Czech churches are no longer living communities of practicing believers. Recently, that perception was disputed in an article written by social scientists from Chicago for an English-language newspaper that is published here in Prague. That article indicated that 'evangelistic' bodies are growing, while 'mainline' denominations, such as the ECCB, the Czechoslovak Hussite Church, and the Catholic Church, are declining. That is an interesting hypothesis; however, I would contend that it is also characterized by a certain degree of inaccuracy.

For instance, the article in question stated that the ECCB has lost nearly 100,000 members since the early 1990s. Although that number is statistically accurate, it must be interpreted in light of the fact that figures reported by the Czech Bureau of Statistics are based on individual responses to census surveys, rather than on church membership rolls. Thus, a number of people who were intrigued by the opportunity to explore Christian traditions, which had been suppressed during the communist era, claimed membership in the ECCB during the early 1990s, although they had not joined the church. In succeeding years, many of those persons appear to have ceased to identify themselves as members of the ECCB.

Yet, barring demographic factors related to age, employment opportunities, and similar variables, church attendance and participation in local congregations has remained fairly constant during the sixteen years since the Velvet Revolution.

Although the researchers from Chicago spent a couple of weeks in Prague consulting with 'evangelical congregations,' they do not appear to have spoken with representatives of the ECCB who might have helped them gain a deeper understanding of the complicated dynamics which underlie the official statistics. Likewise, the visiting social scientists may not have had occasion to ponder the vitality which is reflected by the fact that the ECCB's diaconal wing has grown from 29 to 33 centers in a few short years. Insofar as each of these centers is directly related to particular local congregations, this increase may say more about the vigor of the ECCB than statistical tabulations do. Thus, I have given this update the title "Where is the Life?," in attempt to suggest that acts of compassion, which are carried out in the name and spirit of Christ's command to love our neighbors as ourselves, may be more indicative of a living Church than numbers of self-professed members are.

Furthermore, I continue to be amazed at the commitment and creativity that characterize the local ECCB congregations with which I have contact here in Prague. For instance, in October, the ECCB congregation in Prague 6 celebrated its eightieth anniversary with an incredible array of special events. On Wednesday evening, a concert by the church choir featured selections that were cherished by its founder who had died at a tragically young age, as well as including two magnificent compositions by present choir members. On Saturday afternoon, a prominent ECCB pastor delivered a thought-provoking lecture which identified five elements of the Protestant tradition that are critical for our time, and following some moments of discussion, three of the church's former pastors shared delightful remembrances of 'what the congregation had given them.'

The next morning, the worship area was full for a celebratory service which included a well-crafted sermon by the ECCB's Moderator, Joel Ruml and a moving intercessory prayer offered by the members of the session. After a bountiful lunch, the church was again filled to overflowing as its young people presented a dramatic portrayal of the 'great cloud of witnesses' who have transmitted the Christian tradition across the centuries. St. Francis of Assisi, Jan Milič z Kroměříže, J.S. Bach, and Albert Schweitzer were among the illustrious personalities who came to life through slides, drama, and a variety of musical forms during this fine presentation.

Special celebrations are not unique to this congregation, which regularly hosts international guests, celebrates special events in the lives of its own members, and provides a wide-range of weekly opportunities for study and fellowship. Thus, on a Monday evening just three weeks after the anniversary festivities, several chairs had to be carried into the fellowship room to accommodate the people who had come to hear John speak about church-life in the United States and his work here in Prague. Following an extended period of questions and observations, the minister looked at John with a smile and said "To bylo živé!" Likewise, my eyes are twinkling as I similarly conclude that the church here is "živá," which is to say, that it is alive, living, and lively! Praise be to God.

## **Bridges - Timeless Gifts** by Joyce Michael

I hear that in the United States, the phrases “Merry Christmas” and “Happy Holidays” are being pitted against one another this year. Although it is hard to imagine this debate from a distance, I suspect that many of us have a limited sense of how, when, and where love may become incarnate in our world. Thus I want to tell you a ‘Christmas story,’ which unfolded on a crispy November evening when John and I went to a meeting at a church that we had only seen from the tram prior to that time.

Since darkness had already fallen when we arrived at St. Thomas Church, we could only partially see the tree-ringed courtyard that lies behind the massive walls which encircle that edifice. Yet, we shared a sense of anticipation and wonderment as we followed a series of signs down several dusky corridors, turning where directed until we reached a rather small room that was illumined by candle-light and peopled by a number of young adults seated along a wall and several other folks assembled around a long table. An aura of warmth permeated the greetings that we received as we took our place among the “Friends of Servitus” who had come to learn about a carefully-administered ecumenical organization, which both facilitates the activities of volunteers from other countries who want to spend ten to twelve months serving in the Czech Republic and sends Czech volunteers to participate in similar programs in other nations (including the United States).

If space permitted, I could tell you many interesting facts about Servitus’ ecumenical roots, its process of recruiting, training, and supporting volunteers, its goals and resources, and so forth. However, for me, the most telling part of the evening occurred as a number of volunteers from Germany made their work palpable to us through music, pictures, and stories. Thus, I hope that the following verbal snap-shots will convey the mystery of love incarnate that came to life that evening.

“You are not alone” might be a meaningful way to speak of the work of a young woman whose commitment to her assignment of visiting folks who have limited opportunities to interact with others is evidenced by the fact that she has learned to hear and speak Czech well enough to respond to deep personal concerns in two short months.

“A compassionate presence” might typify the efforts of a young man who is working with autistic children. Photos of daily activities, such as eating lunch, exercising, and preparing for bed, illustrated this volunteer’s patience with, and delight in, his youthful charges. Likewise, pictures shared by a group of volunteers involved with adults who have handicapping conditions reflected gracious acts of caring and genuine ways of relating.

“I will walk with you” might be a fitting caption for memorable photos taken by a volunteer who is working with elderly folks. The serenity which characterized a picture of an excursion along a forest path may provide a particularly graceful image of a gentle way to enter into the final years of life.

“A real celebration” might describe the endeavors of a young musician who directs community-based music and drama programs. As this enthusiastic artist led our group in a participatory singing and motion exercise designed to depict the word L-O-V-E, I could almost envision the joy that he regularly brings to the people who are privileged to attend the events which he organizes. It is likely that the volunteer who provides opportunities for his charges to engage in a variety of athletic activities is also a source of encouragement and delight to his ‘clients.’

“A Reconciling Work” might be an apt way to characterize the focus of a volunteer located in the Bohemian town of Terezin, which was the site of a Nazi concentration camp during the Second World War. The lingering impact of that dark chapter of history and the possibility of reaching a plateau of graceful reconciliation were given powerful expression by a series of photographs symbolizing the irrepressibility of life.

May the Christmas mystery represented by these volunteers’ gifts of their time, their talents, and their lives call each of us to deeper ways of embracing the possibility of peace and enacting the advent of love. Noel!