

Bridges 2007

INDEX

Healing Springs

"Where two or three are gathered"

Revisiting Holy Week

Easter Transformations

We Need You!

"We Need Each Other"

Americanisms: Pointers On Cultural Sensitivity

A Birthday Tribute

Descending into the Garden

"Taking a Stand"

"Living History"

"Resounding Hope"

"Delights"

Bridges - Healing Springs

by Joyce Michael

Soon after returning to Prague in November 2006, I began to translate articles for the Czech Protestant News, which is the forerunner of Czech Mission Network News. After being in the United States for six very intense months, I was both tired and out-of-practice, so preparation of the articles was not an effortless endeavor for me and my colleagues. However, several of the submissions reacquainted me with what had been going on in the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren while John and I were away, and the editorial contained some imagery that I found to be especially compelling. Unfortunately, as often occurs, the part of the editorial that spoke to me with the most power had to be omitted because of lack of space. Thus, I asked for permission to use the two paragraphs that were eliminated as the first BRIDGES of this new year. I hope that their depiction of healing springs will be a source of encouragement in this time when new beginnings seem to be so necessary on so many fronts.

After describing the setting of the seventh 'Euroregional' Church Day, which brought Christians from the Czech Republic, Saxony, Thuringia, and Bavaria together in the Czech city of Cheb and the German town of Marktredwitz last September, Ivana Benešová, the press spokeswoman for the ECCB, created a moving verbal picture when she recalled the ecumenical worship service that was held in the historic center of Cheb at the Church of St. Nicholas (Mikuláš.)

"In exploring the theme, 'Life Begins at the Spring,' Wilfried Beyhl, the bishop of the Protestant Lutheran Church in Bavaria, recalled a moving service of reconciliation that took place in 1995 on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. At that time, both sides asked for forgiveness for all of the horrors of the war and the suffering that resulted from the expulsion of the German residents of Czechoslovakia. 'We mutually extended the hand of reconciliation with the words of forgiveness that God has promised to both of our nations,' the German bishop said, before adding: 'The former wall still stands in the minds of some people. However, a green fern is growing in the cracks of this wall, as it is depicted on the poster for Church Day. Trust between us must grow continually until our countries and our life together become a flourishing garden.'

At the end of the sermon, the bishop invited those present to fill little cups with healing water from four nearby spas after the service had concluded. 'During illness and affliction, we seek the power of healing springs at Františková Lázně and Mariánská Lázně, as well as at spas in Alexandersbad and Bad Ester. Here, I have four pitchers with healing water from these spas.... Which healing spring could make you well? Is there also healing water when our soul has fallen ill and is thirsting for life?' Bishop Beyhl asked. According to him, our faith and hope can be revived by healing water from God because 'in God is the source – the spring – of life.'"

Similarly, at the closing service in Cheb, Jochen Bohl, the bishop of the Protestant Lutheran Church in Saxony, thoughtfully concluded: "Trust and hope begin with a contrite look at the past and the guilt that we have placed upon our shoulders...." As the 'editor' of BRIDGES, I would urge us to join our Czech and German friends in praying that times of "soberly and honestly facing the painful truth of history" will continue to issue in renewing encounters with healing springs of grace.

Bridges - "Where two or three are gathered"

Every January, John, the Moderator of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, and I turn our attention toward the over-arching theme that the editorial staff of the PC(USA)'s Mission Yearbook has suggested for the subsequent year. Sometimes, that theme evokes so many images that it is hard to settle on a single story; other times, ideas are slower in coming and are less directly related to the Yearbook's over-arching emphasis. However, in recent years, the proposed themes have had amazing connections with recent happenings, and our submissions to the Yearbook have come to expression with a certain amount of fervor.

That was the case again this year, when the theme for the 2008 Yearbook was both inviting and timely. Indeed, Rev. Ruml's reflections, which I translated before composing my own contribution, struck me as being unusually insightful and remarkably apt. Thus, I considered not submitting anything dealing with the text in which Jesus says, "Where two or three are gathered in my name...." However, as I began an "experimental" translation of Jakub Trojan's new book, I was reminded of the small groups of Christian dissidents who dared to meet together during the communist era, and that, in turn, led me to recall that this is the year of the thirtieth anniversary of Charter 77, whose signers included a number of the people who participated in those very groups. Thus, I wrote the following reflections to send to the Mission Yearbook team. Since I have asked those dedicated folks to print Rev. Ruml's article this year, I think that it will be acceptable for me to share my reflections with you. Perhaps they will offer you a glimmer of meaning or hope.

Professor Trojan has dedicated his provocative book, *Jesus' Story – a Challenge for Us*, "to friends from New Orientation, dead and living, with whom I entered into conversation and decision-making during the difficult period between 1958 and 1989, growing in confidence in the encouraging meaning of Jesus' life and his Gospel." This dedication alludes to the powerful impact that small groups of Christians had in Czechoslovakia, as they gathered secretly during the communist era to wrestle with penetrating questions of faith and to nurture seeds of grace and justice in an arid landscape of oppressive policies and suppressed hope.

Throughout the country, pastors and educators alike took the risk of hosting groups of political and "spiritual" dissidents who dared to look at biblical texts, theological issues, and philosophical theories without the "rose-colored glasses" that comfortable piety may invite. These groups supported their members with a rare blend of compassion and challenge; facilitated the covert preparation and distribution of type-written copies of books from the West that had been banned by communist authorities; and took up a number of difficult issues. From Brno, where a survivor of Nazi concentration camps hosted groups focused on human rights – to villages in the countryside where pastors opened their doors to people who wanted to explore and preserve a faithful way of living under the communist regime – to a warehouse in Prague where similar gatherings were held – in all of these and many other places – small groups came together despite surveillance, the loss of licenses to preach and teach, and expulsions.

Thus, 30 years ago, a number of participants in these groups joined together to present the government of Czechoslovakia with an unprecedented challenge, as they signed a document called Charter 77, which demanded that authorities abide by their promise to uphold human rights in terms of the Helsinki Accord. As those small groups thus ventured a colossal risk together, the drive for liberation that had been growing, with quiet persistence, for a number of years was enhanced, and now, Professor Trojan and other people of faith are free to develop the insights that emerged in their small groups in ways which may give living embodiment to Trojan's assertion that "...the Christian faith is not cold ashes, but a fireplace from which a flame can burst forth once more."

PRAYER: Let us not forget people of courage, o Lord. When times are easy, may their examples prod us; when times are hard, may their perseverance encourage us; and, above all, may the wisdom that they have gleaned find clear expression, so that Jesus' story can remain a living source of hope and liberation for everyone who is searching for a new orientation. Amen.

BRIDGES - Revisiting Holy Week

by Joyce Michael

As I write these words, Holy Week has just begun, and appropriately enough, I am immersed in ways that the Christian tradition has interpreted the significance of Christ's death across the centuries. As I continue to translate Jakub Trojan's analysis of this matter, I am becoming aware of deeply-engrained assumptions that informed my approach to the themes of Holy Week when I was a parish pastor. Dr. Trojan's articulation of some of the incongruous implications of such presuppositions suggests that my attempts to wrestle with the shadows of Holy Week may have unwittingly made it appear as if God himself became "an accomplice in a crime" when "he sacrificed the one whom...he declared to be his beloved Son at the baptism in the Jordan" (Jesus' Story, 149). Suffice it to say that thanks to Professor Trojan's insightful reflections, I am living close to the paradox of the cross these days.

Therefore, I was recently drawn to take a new look at two poems which Moderator Emeritus, Pavel Smetana, asked me to translate for Easter, 2004. I considered that request to be an honor because working with Rev. Smetana's Christmas poems had become a meaningful experience for me. Yet, although I eagerly tried to complete that project, I never sent the "finished product" to Rev. Smetana. I simply did not think that I had adequately captured the sense of the more pensive of the two poems. Yet, the time seems to have come for me to attempt this task again. I have a feeling that my work with Dr. Trojan's book will enable me to arrive at a more appropriate rendering of the poem that is entitled

Remember, Lord

by Pavel Smetana

My Lord,
remember your mercy;
although I have immersed my sins
in a sea of oblivion.

Remember your suffering,
not the pain
which I have caused my neighbors.

Lord, remember your desolation,
and yet, forget
that I did not find time for the desolate.

Remember your sacrifice of love,
and forgive the destitute heart,
which refuses to love its neighbor.

Remember, Lord, the sinner
who is crying out to you
and by your mercy, open to him
the gate of eternal salvation.

As I typed this, it occurred to me that poets often have a profound sense of the themes of Holy Week. Thus, I want to conclude this BRIDGES with a poem by a Czechoslovak pastor. Some of you found this verse to be quite meaningful when John and I shared it during our itineration in 2006.

Beyond Myself

by Milan Jurčo

We believe,
Within the limits of reason,
We pray,
Within the limits of our will,
We love,
Within the limits of our pain,
We submit,
Within the limits of opinion,
We use our talents,
Within the limits of assured position,
We forgive,
Within the limits of our patience,
We want the gifts of the Holy Spirit
Within the limits of our own standards.

For ages,
We have set limits;
For ages, given orders
As to the way the faithful should go.

O Lord,
Help me go beyond my limitations
And live in Your space,
The space of Your will,
The space of freedom from one's self;
The space of happiness for the soul.
The space
Of a different measure of worth:
The space of the cross of Golgotha.

BRIDGES - Easter Transformations

by Joyce Michael

As I write this up-date on Easter Sunday afternoon, a glance at the clock tells me that in a little while, churches in the United States will be resounding with joyful cadences of "Christ the Lord is Risen Today." Here, in Prague, we have already sung our "alleluias" to traditional Czech tunes and have already pondered the affirmation of God's power that is extended by the mystery of the resurrection. Moreover, the contrast between the reflective re-enactment of the Last Supper that took place on Good Friday evening and the Eucharist that we celebrated today was demonstrated in a striking way by a young woman with Down's Syndrome who is part of the congregation that we attend.

As she stood in the circle of communicants, that special person opened her little yellow songbook so that she could participate in singing the communion hymn. Then, she received the elements seriously and devoutly, as she always does. However, after the words of dismissal, a smile crossed her face, and she walked toward the pastors, rather than heading back to her seat with her co-worshippers. As she shook Pastor Abigail's hand and greeted Pastor Petr, both of those devoted folks responded with gentle smiles. Then, the young woman bent down to take a close look at the pastry Easter lamb that had been placed on the worship table. She lingered for only a few seconds before shaking Pastor Petr's hand again and moving on. Yet, a joyful wonder shone from her face, and a certain ease of movement graced her step. Thus, it was clear to me that she had experienced and enacted an Easter encounter for all of us. In his Easter sermon, Pastor Petr had stressed that the resurrection invites – and calls – us to step beyond the sense of resignation that sometimes holds us fast, and our young friend had shown us what it means to embrace a buoyant hope that is already "eternal" in its grace.

Reflecting on this Easter encounter, I looked at the Easter lamb again. This twelve-inch long and six-inch high pastry is a charming tradition here, although this year, I have also seen pastry roosters and other spring-time critters for sale. Many of the Easter lambs are pre-packaged, commercial products, but others – like the one on the communion table – are carefully made at home. I had noticed that the Easter lamb was in its usual place when I entered the worship area, but I had not focused on it until our young friend stopped before it. The purple ribbon around its neck called to mind Jesus' passion and death, but my eyes were quickly drawn to the lamb's face, which seemed to reflect a winsome blend of wisdom and mercy. "It is just a pastry lamb," I objected, but no – it was a lively symbol of the Easter assurance – that once the season of suffering and betrayal has run its course, the wonder of God's love and Christ's presence will prevail. Our young friend had seen that, and thanks to her vision, I was also able to perceive that the joy and hope of "eternal" life are actually present here and now. Pavel Smetana's second poem from Easter 2004 teased at my mind, and I was convinced that...

A Miracle has happened

On a quiet cottage pathway
in the rays of spring sunshine
a miracle has happened.
The armour of ice has cracked and has
Flowed into streams
Whose thirst is assuaged.
There, where winter had looked down
On morning in a mirror of ice, a tiny daisy
Has now cautiously raised its head.
And in my heart, I have heard these words:
"Spring has now arrived
And has taken command."

In the struggle
Of winter with spring,
Of death with resurrection,
And of the cross with the empty tomb,
Life has been victorious!

SO IT HAS!

Bridges - We Need You!

by Joyce Michaels

Have you ever seen a worshipper taking notes on the pastor's sermon? I must admit that the few times I noticed this happening, I was quite surprised! You see, I assume that people come to worship to speak with God, to experience community, to wrestle with life, or to celebrate wonder, rather than to record fragile words and fleeting insights. Yet, it now appears to me that I participated in this year's Synod of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren (ECCB) almost as if I were attending worship. Although there were many interesting remarks, thoughtful debates, and important decisions, I wanted to be totally immersed in the experience of that annual event. Thus, I made very few notes, and the factual details of the weekend have largely vanished from memory. This means that I must leave "official" summaries of the business transacted by the Synod to more reliable sources. However, it does not mean that I have nothing to report; indeed, it seems to me that the rich cross-cultural exchanges that characterized this year's Synod ought not go unnoted.

It is not surprising that representatives from Great Britain and Holland responded positively to the invitation to the Synod that was extended to English-speaking guests. However, the ECCB was also delighted when church leaders from Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Italy, and Korea arrived in Prague. This diverse group shared fascinating discussions together and extended unusually thoughtful greetings to the Synod. For instance, the guest from Hungary emphasized that since Reformed churches in post-communist countries – like Hungary and the Czech Republic – face similar socio-cultural issues, they may be uniquely equipped to explore theological questions together. Likewise, the guest from Poland spoke of shared Protestant roots and common experiences that may enable rich collaboration with the ECCB. And, an especially significant affirmation was ventured when the representative from Holland concluded his description of his denomination's efforts to "move beyond pessimism to the hope of the Gospel" by paying tribute to Czech insights with the words: "We need you!"

Virtually all of the international guests concurred that the Synod's focus on the pitfalls that are presently threatening marriage and the family was compelling for them. However, it soon became evident that cultural differences engender a variety of approaches to this issue. For instance, as our Korean friends spoke of the impact that their country's highly-patriarchal social structure has on the way church members view divorce, it was clear that in their land, conservatism still holds sway in the area of marriage and family life. Yet, as we internationals sat around a table at the Church of Jacob's Ladder in the Kobylisy section of Prague, the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Korea (PCK) thoughtfully reflected on the forces of social change that are bringing the reality of divorce to the very doorsteps of some Korean Presbyterian churches.

In the Czech Republic, marriage and the family also remain a highly-valued norm. Thus, the ECCB stands somewhere between the PCK and some western European denominations in its views of marriage and divorce. Some individuals in the ECCB place great emphasis on the responsibility that pastors have to model good marriages within the church and society, and a pastor who describes himself as "rather liberal" ruefully concluded that there needs to be more discipline among pastors when it comes to caring for their own marriages and those of their parishioners. Yet, the rather strict-sounding guidelines regarding pastors' marriages that were placed before the Synod appear to have a gracious substratum, when heard in terms of the entire document prepared by the committee responsible for dealing with this topic. Thus, I can imagine that the integrity of the divorced ECCB pastor who shared his story with our group would be recognized by the denomination.

That person initially thought that the failure of his marriage meant that he was not "fit" to serve a congregation. However, his special skills and considerable talent were eventually sought by a congregation who felt that he was uniquely equipped to serve them. Perceiving this to be a confirmation of God's gracious acceptance of our humanness, that pastor humbly returned to congregational service with a strong sense of having been the recipient of God's forgiving mercies. Thus, when the representative from Great Britain concluded his words of greeting with an invitation for the ECCB to let God's merciful spirit guide their considerations of the proposed guidelines, he was affirming a reality that is already well and within the ECCB. May all of such deliberations be informed by grace.

Bridges - "We Need Each Other"

by Joyce Michael

So that these up-dates can easily be printed out and displayed on church bulletin boards or shared with friends, every BRIDGES that you have received so far has been a self-contained, one-page item. To meet this parameter, I sometimes have had to revise the text many times and/or format the page in unusual ways, with small type and tiny margins. However, try as I might, I have been unable to make my hand-written text on this year's Synod fit on a single page. Thus, although BRIDGES 5 ends with what may sound like a "proper" conclusion, I have decided to continue and complete my reflections on this May's Synod in this up-date. Thus, I may be able to expand on the Dutch representative's declaration that "we need you" in a pertinent way.

When I asked our guest from Britain for the exact wording of his comment about God's merciful guidance, he admitted that he could not reconstruct his remarks. "In Britain, our views of marriage and the family are rather different," he added, without identifying the specifics of that incongruity. I suspect that as you readers think of your own experiences with the fragility of human relationships, some of you will have an intuitional sense of the nature of those differences. Thus, instead of speculating about this matter, I will supplement my previous considerations of this year's Synod by following our Dutch friend's lead and declaring "we need each other."

This sense had begun to grow within me as the Synod proceeded, and was further confirmed by the content of the opera that we "internationals" attended together on Saturday evening. As the fragmented relationships that permeate the story of Samson and Delilah appeared before us as so many shadows on the stage, I was amused by the fact that our consideration of marriage and divorce was ending with that particular drama. However, I soon realized that the opera served as a tangible example of the reality that some members of the Synod had expressed the preceding evening; i.e., that human relationships are inherently complex.

Thus, I would venture to say that we partners in international dialogue need each other when we are considering relational matters. We need the Korean vision, which calls us to devote serious attention to the "conserve-ation" of marriage. Yet, we also need the British awareness that guidelines regarding this sacred institution ought to be modeled on God's gracious care. And we need the middle way of Czech Christians who hold that we must not give in to the tendency to treat relationships with a consumerist mentality that views people as interchangeable commodities, but who are equally aware that God's merciful ways are especially salient in the midst of human brokenness. We need each other so that we can thoughtfully consider whether and how the personal trauma that divorce tends to precipitate can itself serve as a context in which God's grace may be made manifest through healing care.

The power and possibility of grace within brokenness took a different, but related, turn when one of our guests presented the President of the Synod with a candle that contained the logo and emblem of his denomination. The President received the candle graciously and placed it in the center of the table, where it eventually was lit by a member of the Synod's Presidium. Nothing about those acts appeared to be remarkable, but I had a sense that this was an extraordinary act, insofar as candles lit in churches are a part of a Catholic tradition that remains rather alien to Protestants here.

When I saw the candle burning brightly on the communion table the next morning at the Synod's concluding worship service, I thought that I had misinterpreted the significance of the candle. However, the President of the Synod openly acknowledged that it had been difficult to agree to use the candle in the worship setting. Yet, together we were able to step beyond conventional practice and let the light of God's presence shine in our midst. If grace can break through centuries of tradition that have grown out of brokenness, can it not also remold the fragmentation that is dramatically symbolized by divorce, but may persist in more familial and social settings than we tend to imagine? That is the hopeful question that the Synod posed for me....

Bridges – Americanisms: POINTERS ON CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

John and Joyce Michael

Czech Mission Network Retreat, Erlanger Kentucky in September, 2006

- 1) Representative misperceptions that some Czechs and Slovaks have regarding Americans
 - a) All Americans are rich, just like the people on Beverly Hills 90210 are.
 - b) Americans must be just like Germans. (All people from western nations are similar.)
 - c) All Americans are hyper-friendly.
 - d) Americans must know everyone who lives in the United States, including my aunt in Milwaukee.
 - e) All Americans always eat hamburgers and hot dogs.

- 2) Tips designed to enable Americans visiting the Czech church to minimize cultural dissonances
 - a) Language
 - i) We sometimes expect English-speaking Czechs to be familiar with idiomatic phrases like “a piggy-back question” or “a bolt out of the blue.” It is best to try to avoid such figures of speech when conversing with non-native speakers.
 - ii) If a phrase spoken by a non-native speaker seems to be inappropriately negative, consider the possibility that the speaker has a different sense of the phrase than we customarily have. (For example, the phrase “you must not answer the phone” sounds prohibitive to us, but may actually be a literal rendering of the Czech expression, which means “you do not need to answer the phone.”)

 - b) Habits, Customs, and Traditions
 - i) You may need to exercise care when admiring your Czech host’s possessions. Many hosts may feel that an appreciated object must be given to the international guest.
 - ii) When dining out, take care to refrain from evaluating food, service, and method of payment according to American practices.
 - iii) Also, do not try to manifest your generosity by over-tipping. Rounding the cost of the meal up to the next multiple of ten is typically considered sufficient. For example, payment for a meal costing 114 crowns would become 120 crowns with the tip added.
 - iv) When possible, do not leave large amounts of uneaten food on your plate, and remember to remove your shoes beside of the door when you enter a home.
 - v) It is considered to be in good taste to take a small gift of chocolates, flowers, or similar token of appreciation when you visit a private home.

 - c) Cultural Insensitivity – Two painful examples:
 - i) A group whose younger members chose not to reciprocate the hospitality – nor take advantage of the insight – offered by a church leader who had been asked to take them on a tour of reformation sites because they ‘had already been to the Old Town Square the night before.’
 - ii) A sermon preached by a pastor from America who assumed that Czech Christians have a tradition of covered dish dinners like we have in the United States, and who then used an illustration about “grey mouse soup” being served in a neighborhood café during a blizzard. This Eucharistic “legend,” which was designed to symbolize the unifying and sustaining power of the Lord’s Supper, would have been difficult for an American congregation to grasp and

- was virtually incomprehensible to the Czech congregation. Check out your presentation with your translator or some other Czech person if you have doubts about its appropriateness.
- d) Do not assume that American customs are known and understood. Two examples:
 - i) An American host, who wanted to know about Czech funeral customs, phrased her questions in terms of American practices, which were unknown to the Czech visitor. Thus, the Czech person was hard-pressed to respond.
 - ii) One Sunday morning, a young Czech friend was in tears, so I (Joyce) reached out to put my arm around her shoulder, as I might have done with a parishioner in the USA. As she drew back, I sensed that I had initiated a type of contact that would have been understood in the United States, but was inappropriate in this context.

 - e) Be aware that organizations, which appear to be similar, do not always have the same structures or serve the same purposes in the Czech Republic. Two examples:
 - i) In the United States, we tend to think of the YMCA in terms of physical exercise, special interest groups, short-term educational or recreational activities, and self-improvement workshops, while in the Czech Republic, the YMCA has a long history of having an “academic” component. Thus, it has tended to provide a forum for wrestling with difficult socio-political issues.
 - ii) Church youth groups in the Czech Republic share some characteristics with comparable groups in the United States. However, they also have some features that are unique to the cultural and social milieu in which they have arisen. The same is true of other local church structures and groups. (It may be worth noting that although women are quite involved in ECCB congregations, an organization similar to Presbyterian Women does not exist in our partner denomination.)

 - f) Refrain from describing their Church to Czech people without listening to their own self-descriptions. Two examples:
 - i) Sometimes, Americans who have heard about the secular nature of Czech society seek to console Czech Christians by saying things like: “I am sorry that the church is dead here. That must be very difficult for you.” Such statements surprise Czech church-people who are part of vital congregations.
 - ii) Sometimes, Americans assume that we know what the Czech Church should be and do, without taking its long heritage and present forms into account. It may be instructive to consider the response of one church leader to such an approach: “Thank you for your advice about how to reach people outside of the church, but we must find ways of outreach that fit our culture and traditions.”

 - g) Avoid interpreting Czech people’s descriptions of church practices or political situations in terms of your own local church’s traditions or our nation’s issues.
 - i) In strange surroundings, it is natural to look for something familiar. However, we should guard against saying (either to ourselves or aloud), “that’s just the way it is back home.” Quickly drawing that conclusion short-circuits the listening process and prevents us from hearing how things really are with our hosts.
 - ii) On other occasions, visitors expand on a perceived parallel between Czech and American societies in ways which divert the conversation away from the Czech situation and focus it on how things are in United States. Of course, there is a place for cross-cultural analyses, but the Czech host should never be made to feel as if he is on the outside, listening in on a discussion of American issues.

- h) Finally, try to curb the tendency to assume that American practices are superior, educationally, spiritually, in terms of life-style, and so forth. Two examples:
- i) One visiting couple asked their host: "Is there a Marks and Spencer store here? And what about a place where we can get some crystal and jewelry? We want to buy a lot of things to help the Czech economy." In exasperation, the Czech host replied: "If you really want to help our economy, maybe you can buy a tractor."
 - ii) The Czech university system is very different from the American one, but the professors in the Czech Republic are every bit as engaged in research, writing, publishing, and seeking to engage their students as professors in the United States are. Thus, inquiries about sending American professors to the Czech Republic should be complemented by invitations for Czech professors to teach in this country.

Bridges – A Birthday Tribute

by Joyce Michael

In late April, Professor Jakub Trojan invited me to come to the Protestant Theological Faculty to discuss ways that my translation of his most recent book could be made available to scholars and church people in the United States. As always, I felt honored to be able to enter into a pleasant and productive conversation with this remarkable man. Near the end of our meeting, he reminded me that he would be retiring from his post as professor of ethics in October. “Yes, I just translated an article about you for Czech Mission Network News,” I responded with a smile, before asking a few questions about that detailed tribute to Professor Trojan’s service. My request for clarification felt rather presumptuous, given the intensity of his schedule those days. However, as I asked practical questions regarding the specific years that he had engaged in various activities, Professor Trojan’s demeanor changed, and a thoughtful reverie of remembrance began. I suddenly realized that I was hearing a very personal elaboration on the article that I had translated. For a moment, I wished that I could share that version of Professor Trojan’s story with the readers of Czech Mission Network News; yet, I simultaneously knew that I was being entrusted with a private glimpse into a life that has evinced a rare degree of conviction, perseverance, and faith, which should, perhaps, remain unwritten – except in my memory’s transitory register. However, this evening, one portion of that recollection appears to be clamoring for expression.

After working as a common laborer for a time after his license to be a pastor was revoked by communist authorities, Professor Trojan was given a job in the field of economics prior to his retirement at the age of 62. However, when the Velvet Revolution occurred a few months later, he was invited to teach at the Protestant Theological Faculty, where he was also elected to the post of dean. “It was as if a new beginning had arrived,” he declared, before reporting that he was putting the finishing touches on a lecture that he would be delivering on May 15th at a convocation marking his 80th birthday and upcoming retirement. “My topic is the joy that the study of theology brings. I would like you to be there,” he added. “What a wonderful theme! I most certainly will come,” I exclaimed.

I was delighted when an elegant invitation to that event arrived by post and as John and I entered PTF’s large lecture hall. That room was filled with people who had come to share that landmark day, and my sense of anticipation grew as Dean Martin Prudký gave a thoughtful summary of Professor Trojan’s life and work. Dr. Jiří Halama – who is likely to succeed Dr. Trojan as the chair of the Faculty’s department of ethics – served as the master of ceremonies; Professor Martin Balabán – who recently joined Professor Trojan in publishing a book of poetry – gave a witty response to the lecture; and several people ventured thoughtful questions.

From a remote corner in the lecture hall, I found myself straining to hear what was being said, and I must confess that the content of the

proceedings – and of the lecture itself – was largely lost to a crowded room and rather poor acoustics. I have a sense that Professor Trojan contrasted philosophy’s dogged focus on the weighty questions raised by the harsh realities of existence with theology’s distinctive orientation toward the possibility of hope. I have a sense that he stressed that theology is a discipline which is always unfolding. I have a sense that he declared that theology is a source of joy because it is an inherently dialogical endeavor, a communicative process. Yet, I cannot tell you exactly what Professor Trojan said on May 15th. Thus, you may be wondering where I got these ideas, and why I am trying to write about an event that I did not understand completely.

In response, I would suggest that one of the musical selections which members of Professor Trojan’s family performed as a “prelude” to the lecture plunged me into the harsh realities with which Professor Trojan struggled throughout the communist years, even as it mediated the sustaining joy that theology has given him. The music was a dialogue between a poignantly melodic violin part and a discordantly disruptive piano part. How representative of a regime that forcefully violated human dignity at regular intervals, and how affirming of the deep substratum of faith whose resolving tones cannot be silenced by any discordant interlude! I could not hear all of Professor Trojan’s spoken words, but I do know that his very life has exemplified his open-minded and true-hearted approach to the joy of theology. We may be grateful indeed!

Bridges - Descending into the Garden

Can you imagine attending church every night of the week? If you grew up in an earlier era in a milieu where revival-style services were held for several nights in a row, you may have a sense of this possibility. However, a week-long series of events, which took place at the local church that John and I regularly attend, was of an entirely different sort. I was aware that plans were underway for a “biennial” on behalf of the diaconal center in the Stodůlky district of Prague that is directly related to our congregation. In ordinary times, the pastors and some members of the church periodically visit this center, which provides a work – and in some cases, a living and school – setting for young people with multiple disabilities. Likewise, guests from the center occasionally present special music at worship, and their handcrafted creations are available for purchase following Sunday services before Christmas and Easter. However, the biennial was an extraordinary event, designed to raise a substantial amount of money to restore, improve, and expand the building that houses the center. Indeed, as soon as I entered the sanctuary on Sunday morning, May 18th, I knew that something remarkable was about to occur. An intriguing example of religious art near the worship area seemed to be specially-made for the narrow wall space where it had been hung. Its earth-toned depiction of a benedictory figure enhanced the worship setting in an inviting way. Thus, I was eager to return that evening for the start of the biennial, which would feature an exhibit of 70 artistic works and a variety of cultural programs.

Although I did not know what the opening festivities would be like, I instantly felt at ease as I wandered through a familiar space that had been transformed from a worship setting into an exhibition hall. I joined a number of other people in gazing at various works of art composed of diverse of styles and media; there were still-lives, landscapes, abstracts, woodcuts, oil paintings, water colors, photographs, fabric designs, and some creations that I cannot quite describe. In particular, I saw that two of the paintings were the work of Miroslav Rada, the celebrated creator of epic depictions of biblical themes who persisted in developing a unique style throughout the communist era when religious art was not “in favor” in official circles and when his distinctive style was not always appreciated by the Christian community. When synod guests had visited Rada’s atelier earlier in May, I was delighted to see photos of a massive portrayal of Christ’s passion that Rada began to paint a few years ago without knowing if he would have the strength to finish it. He had completed that work in fine form and has begun new projects that continue to reflect the integrity and power of his art. After I hurried to look at Rada’s highly-valued work, I strolled around the room, letting various pieces of the exhibit claim me as if I were their own.

However before I finished that delightful activity, the master-of-ceremonies drew our attention to the area of the room from which worship is usually conducted. That young seminarian reminded us of the objectives of the biennial before inviting various people to bring greetings. For example, Joel Ruml, the moderator of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, creatively reflected on the biennial’s theme, which invited its guests to “Descend into the Garden,” in terms of the fact that the sanctuary where the exhibition was set up is actually a “basement.” Then, a man whom I had often seen on the evening news was introduced. Mr. Karel Schwarzenberg – who had become the Czech Republic’s Minister of Foreign Affairs (Secretary of State) while we were in the United States in 2006 – was wearing his distinctive bow tie and initially seemed to be a bit ill at ease. However, after uttering some official words, he ventured a well-received witticism and warmly affirmed diaconal service.

The words offered by such distinguished guests were important. However, for me, the most memorable aspect of the evening was mediated by “Syrinx,” a flute choir that performed several classical selections. Several young women – who included one of our ministers’ daughters – stood in a semi-circle, and following the lead of an older master performer, drew us into the rhythms of joy and contemplation—and dissonance and harmony—which punctuate our daily lives. The sounds were richer and fuller than any flute music that I have ever heard, and the familiar tones of Debussy’s *Claire de Lune* cast a deep calm over the packed room. As I left the building I knew that this biennial would provide its participants with extra-ordinary encounters with the textures of light and shadow that characterize the lives of the people who are part of the diaconal center at Stodůlky and every one of us who has been created in the image of the one who declares: “I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe, I am the Lord who do all these things” (Is 45:7).

BRIDGES - "Taking a Stand"

by Joyce Michael

A few years ago, as I sat in a coffee shop overlooking Wenceslas Square, I mentally began to write a letter extolling the picture-postcard of international harmony that I saw below. Hare Krishnas were moving rhythmically up the street, as a contingent of Japanese tourists mingled with Czech residents and multi-national groups. Thinking of Iraq, Darfur, and other troubled spots, I wished that people from such regions could catch a vision of this more gracious way. That image has remained intact, so I was surprised when our landlady decided not to accompany John and me to a benefit concert on behalf of the Diaconal Center for disabled children and youth that is located in the Stodůlky section of Prague. She said, "I would be afraid to go. The church is near the Jewish Quarter, and the Neo-Nazis are coming there for Crystal Night. There will be hundreds of police with tear gas and water cannons, and who knows what will happen." Later, John said, "I am inclined to go to the concert to show that I will not be intimidated by threats and hatred." "Yes," I replied, "and before the concert, I would like to attend the ecumenical gathering in the Old Town Square that will recall the night in 1938 when the Nazis burned so many houses and synagogues. I think that we must be there."

The decision had been made, and despite our landlady's repeated warnings, I was not worried. I could not imagine that anything could break the peace of "my" city. Yet, early on Saturday afternoon, I was less sure. Walking to a store in our neighborhood, we passed four young men whose clothes told us who they were. Then, we boarded the metro with other boys wearing the same tell-tale shirts. Standing inches away from that little group, I felt a sense of disdain that only grew as we passed riot-clothed police, armored cars, bands of young men in black, and other people wearing the yellow star that was used to identify Jews when they were rounded up by the Nazis decades ago. "Something might actually happen," I concluded. Yet, at the edge of the Square, the presence of three young men holding shields bearing the word "Jude" seemed to speak a resounding "no" to the neo-Nazis.

A surprisingly large crowd had gathered in front of the Hus Memorial, where prayers and speeches were not only offered by clergy, politicians, and advocacy groups, but also by elderly concentration camp survivors, one of whom was wearing a trademark black-and-white-striped prison uniform. It was hard to hear – we were far from the stage and a police helicopter kept circling overhead. Yet, a somber reading of the names of all of the concentration camps did not escape my ears, and I heard occasional words like "honor," "suffering," "responsibility," "victims," and "unfortunately," followed by references to the neo-Nazis. Finally, a member of the Jewish community concluded his remarks by playing a shofar, which was often used to sound a call to battle, but could also be an invitation to celebration. Turning from left to right, he blew into that ancient instrument and breathed a blessing over the entire crowd.

A sense of peace prevailed as we walked to the church, where another large group had assembled to support the Diaconia and hear a celebrated choir. Yet, although the singers' harmonies were rich and full, I sensed that there were menacing sounds beyond the church's substantial walls. "Was that a flare?" I wondered as I looked at the chancel window. My suspicions were soon confirmed, as one composition ended and a steady wail of sirens sounded. For several minutes, we sat in suspense. Then the concert resumed, and an aura of peace permeated the room. .

After greeting several friends, we found ourselves on quiet streets, peopled by concert-goers, couples, dog owners – and lines of police and vehicles, blocking all entrance to the Jewish quarter. I wanted to conclude that the neo-Nazis had vanished into the night. I wanted to believe that the gracious example represented by the faithful people who had filled the Square and the church had carried the day. I wanted to hope that harmony had won out over sirens, and that the God of love and Prince of Peace had prevailed in Prague on Saturday, November 10, 2007. However, the television news revealed that the neo-Nazis had marched – not in the Jewish Quarter as planned – but on streets near our office. We saw confiscated weapons, hooded neo-Nazis, running police, and chaotic streets, which proved that the threat had been real; its perpetrators had not just faded away. Thus, the blessing that was breathed in the Old Town and the peace that we took with us from the church must purposely be cultivated by every one of us.

BRIDGES - "Living History"

by Joyce Michael

Early one morning in June, I joined three colleagues from the national headquarters of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren for a journey to the eastern Moravian village of Kunwald. Although it was an unseasonably cool and rainy day, a number of other people had come to that remote location to commemorate the 450th anniversary of the founding of the Unity of Brethren. The unique legacy of that literary and pacifistic branch of the Czech Reformation was quite evident in the diverse array of events that were featured during the morning hours. Visitors could listen to a lecture, watch a group of young folk dancers, or examine – and perhaps purchase – some of the attractive handcrafted items that were on display. They could also explore school rooms that demonstrated a contemporary application of Comenius' revolutionary understanding of teaching and learning, or look at an extensive display, which visually depicted the history of the Unity and documented that movement's continued existence as a "scattered seed" that is still seeking to cultivate its gracious vision of the Christian way throughout the world. It was also possible to enjoy the Czech equivalent of a high school band, and to taste a few of the traditional pastries which had been prepared for that festive day. Nor will I soon forget the warm welcome that was extended by the mayor of Kunwald and his wife. As I joined my colleagues in his office where packets of information about the ECCB were being assembled, a village official handed me a bag of treasures, which included decals, postcards, booklets, and even a commemorative shirt, mug, and bottle of wine. "I am not really an international guest," I objected. "But, we are glad that you are here," my friend affirmed.

I was also glad, as I made my way down the hill to the simple meeting house that has been re-constructed at the site where the Unity gathered for worship before being forced into exile or covert existence in 1621.

The festivities that took place in front of that building were also multi-sensory. Everyone who passed by the statue of Comenius at the top of the hill was given a special Czech pastry by young women clad in traditional garb. Standing below under rustling trees, we heard about the legacy of the "Brethren Tree," as Moderator Ruml creatively reflected on the symbolic significance of that massive linden. Colorful designs brightened the scene as a group from Kunwald's sister city in the USA presented the Czech mayor with a flag that had been specially-designed to represent the town of Lititz Pennsylvania. The harmonic sounds produced by a bell choir from Zelow Poland, where a number of Czech exiles had settled in 1621, offered yet another sensory delight. Likewise, the burst of color supplied by the bright attire of the regional Catholic bishop paled in significance as he extended a word of apology – or more accurately – a word of regret for the brutal impact that the Counter-reformation had had on the Unity of Brethren. Although he said that he could not actually apologize for acts which belonged to a time that was long since past, he knew that some reconciling words were in order and must be expressed.

However, nothing spoke to me as powerfully as did the presence of a man dressed in simple black and white clergy garb. This fascinating figure appeared before us playing a large, recorder-like instrument whose haunting tones called us to reverent silence. Those sounds were followed by resonant recitations of several passages from Comenius' writings. As I listened to the impressionist's deep – and sometimes fiery – voice, I had a sense that I almost knew how the members of the Unity felt upon hearing Comenius' compelling words when he was their bishop. It was as if I had been transported to another time that day, and, in fact, I had a comparable experience on November 14 when the same man began the opening session of an international conference on Comenius with a similar performance. Thanks to that artist and to the 200 scholars from 70 nations who gathered in Prague to reflect on Comenius' life and work, the concluding words of the conference surely are true. "Comenius lives!" in the minds and hearts of all who dare to seek for, and cultivate, the unified approach to the whole of life, which is the distinctive legacy of the final bishop of the Unity.

BRIDGES - “Resounding Hope”

by Joyce Michael

Some years ago, when I was serving a neighborhood church in a county seat town, a particular funeral director always phoned me when the deceased person’s family was not associated with a church. At that time and in that place, it was automatically assumed that a funeral entailed a Christian service carried out by an ordained minister. However, in a secular society impacted by decades of communist rule, which supplanted religious rituals with token observances that were severed from their deeper roots, funerals sometimes take a very different form.

Thus, my friend looked troubled as she began to speak. A childhood companion had died at the age of thirty-five, and her funeral had just taken place. However, since her family had no religious roots, it had been an unusually sad event. Parents, family, and many young friends sat together in silence, listening to the popular music that the young woman had enjoyed. And that was all that happened. Not a single word was spoken in an attempt to contextualize the woman’s life in the profound questions that are invariably raised when a young person dies. No prayers were said, no tributes were shared, no glimmer of hope was extended to the people who had come to bid their companion farewell, and my friend was left feeling bewildered. Indeed, she might have been speaking for me when she said, “I have always thought that although ours is a secular society, it is deeply rooted in the Christian tradition. I have always believed that ours is a Christian nation at heart, but this funeral has shown me a different reality. What is the function of a funeral without any words of hope?”

My friend’s observations told me that I must also critique my recurrent conclusion that the secular Czech society remains profoundly connected to its Christian underpinnings, and thus continues to manifest the grace and goodness that Jesus commanded us to embrace and embody. The barren image of grieving people leaving a “concert” of recorded popular music suggested that at least one segment of the atheistic sector of Czech society does not know that “even the darkness is not dark to God.” At least part of that secular society remains a stranger to the hope that underlies the Christian faith.

Thus I shared my friend’s perplexity until a few days later when a member of the Synodal Council invited John and me to a special Advent concert. “There will be a Mozart piano concerto and the Ryba mass,” he invitingly said. I smiled expectantly, as I anticipated hearing the classic Czech Christmas mass that has come to mean so much to me in recent years. That evening, we found ourselves seated in the balcony of the Rudolfinum, surrounded by members of the choir that would perform the mass following the intermission. Looking at the program, we learned that similar groups from throughout the Republic had come to Prague to be part of an exceptional event.

Expectation continued to mount as the singers filled the stage behind the orchestra and the lofts beside of the organ, and when the familiar strains of music began to resound, I had a strong sense that neither the soloists nor the choirs were just mouthing words. Although the lyrics were not as clear as they tend to be in more intimate venues, the story of Christ’s birth was becoming a living reality in that concert hall. Thus, by the time the final Alleluias rang out, I had the same conviction – that a new day of hope and promise was at hand – which I had experienced last Christmas Eve when the Ryba composition was the backdrop of an actual mass that I attended at a neighborhood Catholic Church. An encore of Czech carols, which concluded with the audience joining in the singing of “Narodil se Kristus Pán” (Christ the Lord is Born), further confirmed that the melody of hope has not been silenced by secularity. Yet, we must find a way for this melody to spill out of concert halls and churches and into the streets. Only thus will hurting people be able to discover that there really is a resounding hope that can bind up their wounds and make them whole. Let it be so!

Bridges - "Delights"

by Joyce Michael for

When I began to write about our congregation's week-long biennial on behalf of the Diaconal Center in Stodůlky, I hoped to describe that entire experience on a single page. However, I had already alluded to the impossibility of that plan when I returned home from an especially fine program and enthusiastically said, "I will have a whole year's worth of BRIDGES in my mind by the end of this week!" Yet, after devoting BRIDGES 7 to this theme, so many significant events occurred that I did not expect to return to the biennial despite a number of untold stories. However, a mid-Advent adventure convinced me that picking up this theme may be a good way to invite each of you to embrace the New Year with a sense of delight.

While John's sister was visiting Prague in mid-December, we happened upon the large white tent that is annually set up on the edge of Vítězné náměstí (Victory Square). Although we live fairly close to that square, we had never explored the tent where seasonal entertainment is offered to children each year. However, being an adventurous soul, John's sister said, "Let's go in," and being curious folks, we did exactly that. A Sunday afternoon puppet show began just moments later, and I soon felt like a kid myself as I laughed at the woodsman who asked three different sheep their names, and each time received the answer "BAA!" I was amazed at the skill of the puppeteers who entranced children as young as three and grandmothers as old as eighty with their ability to bring a diverse array of characters to life in a way that commanded attention and invited response. Yet, I was especially impressed by the theme of the hour-long pohádka (story) that we experienced.

You see, it was not just any tale that was coming to life in a magical way – it was the story of Jesus' birth, replete with angels, shepherds, wise men, Mary, Joseph, and some uniquely Czechoslovak characters. The dialog and the action were lively, and no one left the crowded tent. Thus, I again concluded that there really is a place for Christianity's distinctive message of hope here in this secular society. In planning its programming, the municipal district of Prague 6 had not omitted the story of Christ's birth. Thus, the wonder of Bethlehem had captivated children and adults alike on an Advent afternoon. As we left the tent, I recalled another puppet show that I had seen at our church in Prague 6 during the May biennial for the Diaconia, and I wondered if that performance had been based on a traditional Czech tale or a religious theme? I could remember the lecture in which Professor Milan Balabán related the tangible delights described in the Song of Solomon to Jesus' life. When asked about the propriety of analyses that move backward in time, that scholar astutely observed that rich poetic texts invite, and even require, multiple interpretations. I could recall the enchanting performance of a recorder choir composed of young people from our congregation, and I could almost hear the complex polyphonies produced by an ensemble of accomplished vocalists who specialize in baroque music. I cherished being able to see another, more playful, side of a respected church leader, doctor, and author who joined another writer in reading some of his witty reflections on traveling and such. And I was especially charmed to remember a soloist who sang some of Dvořák's compositions with her whole soul, and a cellist who played a Bach work with such deep passion that his instrument slipped from his grip for a second.

I remember a lot about the May biennial on behalf of the Diaconia, but I cannot recall the theme of the puppet show because my mind's eye is solely focused on an enchanting scene following the performance when tiny children who had been captivated by the puppets rushed up to the little stage to meet their new friends. I can't help but wonder how many children similarly crowded around the stage after the play in Prague 6, eager to smile upon the baby Jesus. And I wonder how many of us will let ourselves be delighted by the promise of hope that the Christmas story invariably offers. May you be delighted by the warmth of Christ's presence throughout the coming year