

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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