

BRIDGES ... Number 6, 2005: A GRAND OPENINGS

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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 Dvo*e 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 Dvo*e 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 guests 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 Dvo*e Kralové in 2003 and at the dedication of the hospice in Valašské Mezi*í*í 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 Dvořák 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.