

BRIDGES: Number 10, 2005, "Where is the Life?," prepared on behalf of the ECCB's American Working Group and the 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 Milić 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.