

## **...BRIDGES... Number 9, 2006: On Singing and Signing**

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

As John and I begin to turn our attention toward Prague, a few strong memories seem to be inviting me to share some recollections that call forth similar feelings, although one occurred in Prague and the other took place in Ohio. Usually, I resist drawing such parallels, lest I misrepresent the uniqueness of either setting. However, the time may have come for me to reflect a bit on some transcending themes.

In the fall of 2005, John and I worshipped with a congregation in the Nusle section of Prague. We went there to attend the installation of an associate pastor and to support the full-time pastor of that church. You see, Irena had led the singing at the Bible study that John had presented at the international Gathering of Christians, which had taken place in the spring, and we had wanted to visit her congregation ever since.

In keeping with John's out-going spirit, we made our way to a pew near the front of the sanctuary. A feeling of serenity filled that sunny room, as Irena picked up her guitar to lead the congregation in a chorus that she had selected specifically for that day. Suddenly, her words of introduction assumed a personal cast, as she looked our way and said, "I would like John and Joyce to sing the first verse in English, and then we will all join in." I was surprised. Although Irena assumed that John and I would know the song, we had never seen it before, and its tricky rhythm and complex melody line did not bode an "easy read." Yet, suddenly, as if on cue, I heard my rather scratchy voice joining John's well-modulated tones in singing our "assigned" verse. In no time at all, our "solo" was over, and as the congregation joined in, I dared to make as many mistakes as I wanted. When the song had ended, I was surprised to discover that I did not feel embarrassed by the fact that my "sight-reading" had been heard by everyone in the room. Somehow, missed rhythms and wrong notes seemed incidental compared with the spirit of unity that filled the room. The part of me that likes to do things right had given way to the part of me that enjoys letting experiences be just as they are....

I had nearly forgotten that morning until late August, 2006 when John and I worshipped at

the Oak Hill Presbyterian Church in Akron, Ohio. We had gone there to renew John's long-standing ties with that congregation, and knowing that we would be sharing a "moment for mission," we had again taken a seat near the front of that tranquil sanctuary. At various points, the service was punctuated by special music consisting of recorded songs that were signed by two women and their daughters. Those beautiful movements complemented the tunes' thoughtful words, and gave us a chance to experience one of the ways that hearing-impaired people can enter into music's depths. As I watched, I concluded that people who can both hear and see are doubly blessed when melodies are signed as well as sung.

However, an entirely different opportunity to participate soon presented itself, as the whole congregation was invited to sign one of the song's refrains. Since I am a relatively-uncoordinated individual, there were some movements that I did not manage to figure out before the song ended. Yet, there I stood, right in the front of that sanctuary, trying my best to sing by signing. My movements were small and constrained, rather than elegant and inspiring. However, that did not seem to matter. Again, I found myself doing what I had been invited to do, as if there is something more important than "getting it right." Under other circumstances, I might have been self-conscious and self-bound. However, missed turns and crumpled arcs again seemed incidental compared with the spirit of unity that filled the room. Thus, I am bound to conclude that "there's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea," which has the potential to transform our customary self-preoccupations and to command a faithful response, no matter whether we are "here" or "there."