

...BRIDGES... Number 5, 2007: "We Need You!"

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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.