

...BRIDGES... Number 4, 2008: Part 1: "Telling the Stories"

by Joyce Michael for the ECCB's American Working Group & PC(USA)'s Czech Mission Network

As 2007 turned toward 2008, I had a "brain storm." I could ask people who had been writing to me about Czech-inspired activities in their local congregations to contribute short paragraphs for a special issue of BRIDGES. That invitation met with such enthusiastic replies that I decided to include two of the full-page articles that I had received in the next *Czech Mission Network News*. Yet, I now have too much material for the *News*, so I want to share those related articles with you in this two-part BRIDGES. The first of these was written by Nancy Jane Edelman who went above and beyond the call of duty to send this article by post when her attempts to communicate with me by e-mail were unsuccessful. I am sure that you will join me in thanking her for persevering in her effort to share her enthusiasm and commitment with us.

In the fall of 2007, four Sunday School sessions at Fox Chapel Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh were focused on mission. I led the one that was devoted to the work of the Diaconia of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren because my husband and I have made four trips to the Czech Republic and have taken members of our congregation on two of them. As conversation starters, we had a display of crafts and other memorabilia on a long table, and Jeanne Christy and Louise Lytle assembled a collection of photos that had been taken during our visits. However, the morning really began after Harry "Bud" Edelman opened the session with prayer, and several participants in various events reported on different aspects of our Czech experience.

For example, Louise Lytle told of our visit to a center for disabled persons in Plzeň, where the total budget for seven or eight people, supplies, and maintenance was less than we would pay one person. The older children there gave a musical performance. A small boy with cerebral palsy attached himself to Bud Edelman for the entire time, holding his hand and saying, "man, man, man," his only English word.

Wilma and Mike Nemeč spoke of the workshop for disabled people in Soběslav where candles, wooden toys, painted pottery, and silk scarves were being made. One young man, unable to do anything except cut out the price tags, was still able to indicate that Wilma needed a chair when he saw her on crutches. Classes for small children are also held there, and the rooms have been beautifully painted with fanciful animals by a local minister.

John and Wilberta Pickett told about our group's participation in worship with the members of the Church of Jacob's Ladder. Jay Collins, the Fox Chapel pastor who was with us, helped serve communion, and Verne Koch and I read scripture. The songbooks had words in English, Italian, French, German, and Czech. We sang the hymns together, but in our own languages. The congregation had a lovely reception for our group following worship.

Susan Kendall told of our visit to a home for the elderly in Písek. Our group had taken puzzles, bingo games, yarn, and other crafts for them. We had lunch with the staff, and were entertained by a small chorus accompanied on the organ by an elderly resident. The chorus was surprised to learn that we knew the music of Antonín Dvořák, and were even more surprised when we recognized "When the Saints Go Marchin' In." On our second visit, the organist – who had entered the home not speaking – had increased the group to sixteen, had created a songbook for them, and was communicating with everyone. An elderly lady who was bedfast had crocheted a doily and had it framed for each of us.

Verne and Mary Ann Koch told of our first visit to what our group calls the "Yellow House." That looked like a dilapidated building which we would have torn down. However, it was to become a sheltered workshop, a tea room with crafts for sale, and a dorm for people who live too far away to commute. We were shown that one wall of a planned addition would be made up of the old city wall. On later visits, proud local people showed us around the finished house, and we were proud too. Most of the money donated by Fox Chapel Presbyterian Church has been given to the "Yellow House."

I spoke between each presentation, adding little stories and tying the entire program together. I provided background information about several of the Diaconia's personnel, the difficulties posed by the primarily atheistic government, the make-up of the diaconal centers' local boards, our lunch with the mayor of Soběslav, and so forth. Then, Charlie Haeussner – who had recently visited the Diaconia's national offices – gave a PowerPoint presentation on the history of the Reformed Church in the Czech Republic, and tied its mission to the history of our own Presbyterian Church (USA). It was a great occasion for bringing our Czech connections to life for people who have not yet had an opportunity to go to the Czech Republic.

---by Nancy Jane Edelman