

PARTNER PLAN

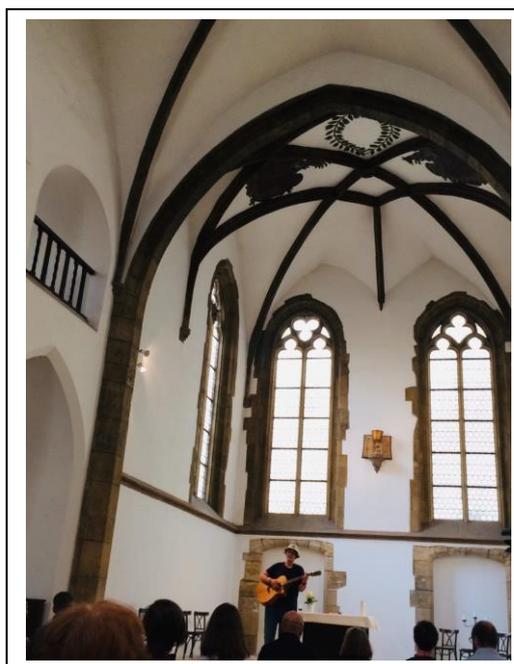
David Sinclair - Czech Republic. July 2020

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Dear Friends,

Here in Prague you would think, if it were not for the masks, that life was back to normal. The shops have been open for some weeks, people are back at work, and the churches are open as well. Prague recently celebrated 'Churches Night', postponed from last month, when hundreds of churches opened their doors for people to come in for concerts, exhibitions, talks, discussions, or simply to look. It is an event that happens every year and is always well attended, even this year; it is a chance, in a country where church attendance is low, for people to maintain an annual interest and an annual contact.



The masks, of course, stand out as the thing that still makes us realise that these are not normal times; they are still worn in shops and on public transport – but not (unless you want to) in the open air. They also make it possible to be in the shops, or to be in church. They provide, in their abnormality, the ability to be normal.

Worship, of course, with a mask on, is a slightly strange experience – singing is particularly strange and inevitably muffled, but we do sing. At least, those of us who are there sing. Attendance is still a long way down on what would be normal in the church we attend. This is true also of other places, somewhat to the frustration of ministers who would like to be preaching to greater numbers, and are worried that fear of our neighbours will cause an unhealing and permanent wound in the body of the church.

But, of course, life, in spite of appearances here, is not normal. Although the ravages of the disease have been much better controlled here than in the UK, it is still

present and a small number of new cases are reported most days. With borders only beginning to open, tourists from other countries are yet to return and economic activity has a lot of recovery to accomplish.

Within the churches, many events have been cancelled. And those that have not been cancelled altogether have been postponed, causing a knock-on effect with clashes over dates in the coming years, meaning that other events further down the line have themselves to be cancelled or postponed.

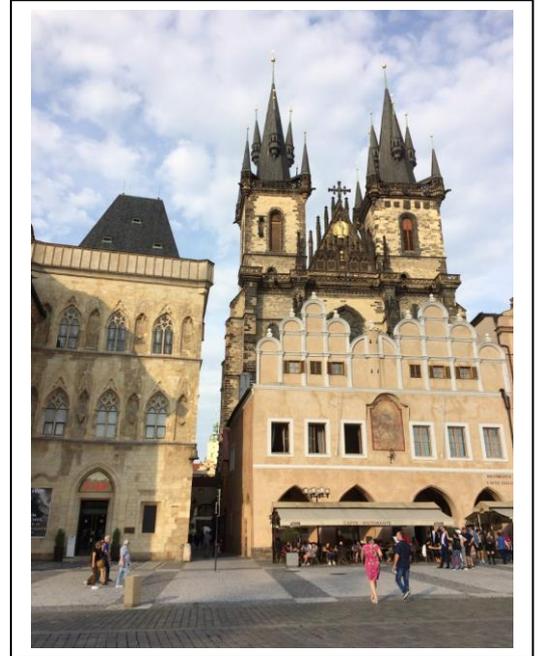
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PARTNER PLAN

One of the events that has had to go completely was a planned conference next April for those involved in Czech-Scottish partnerships. We would have had to pay half the cost of the hotel accommodation in December, meaning that people would have had to book before then, and we thought that not enough people would be ready this autumn to commit to travelling. It is a great pity, but such is life with Covid-19.

As with the Church of Scotland, the ECCB was already faced with financial difficulties and has had those difficulties greatly increased by the economic fallout from the pandemic. One small example is the position of head of our department, which has been vacant since the end of 2019, looks like remaining vacant because the funds to pay for the post are simply not there.

It has often been said, and not only since shutdowns around the world, that meetings could be just as effective online as in person. My experience has been that online meetings have their place, but the thing at which they are most effective is saving money – and that, in these times, is important. They are, however, not nearly so useful when it comes to planning, and sharing new thinking, and trying to find a way forward – and they are not good at all unless those taking apart already know one another, have already met face to face.



So too with online church services, I think, and so too with letters. Conveying information is all very well, but doing more than that is most possible when we are in touch with people we already know. That is why it was so good that Mary and I were able to meet so many of you when we were in Scotland in November – because it means that when I write I have at least some idea of who will be reading what I write. And thank you to those of you who continue to write to us – it is always great to hear from you.

Much of my job here has been about tending and promoting partnerships, encouraging and enabling visits – to the Czech Republic and from it. All that work has now ground to a halt. But we have been doing a survey recently, asking congregations here to let us know about the partnerships in which they are involved. We also asked them to let us know if they were interested in new partnerships. As with all surveys, we have not had responses from everyone (at least not yet); but many have told us about their activities and interests.

So far, we have recorded 21 partnerships with Germany, 10 with the Netherlands, 7 with the USA, 2 with Austria, 3 with Slovakia, 2 with Romania, one each with England, France and Tanzania, and currently 5 (soon to be 6) with Scotland. And among the expressions of interest are a further 4 or 5 who mention Scotland. Clearly no one is going to be doing much travelling any time soon, but it is very possible to develop a partnership based on email and online communication – with the travelling, if so desired, coming later.

This way into partnership is one much closer to the idea of pen pals that was around when I was young, an introduction to one another that involves not nearly so much in terms of time or expense – but one that carries the possibility of greater things to come. If this is something that would interest your congregation, or a group within it (perhaps a youth group, or a bible study group, or the Guild branch) please get in touch with me – and I will do my best to provide a bit of matchmaking.

PARTNER PLAN

Over the next two Sundays the congregation we attend will be hearing the two candidates shortlisted to become their new minister when the current minister retires in about 15 months' time (they do things a little differently here sometimes). It will be interesting to see what happens – and it will be interesting to see if the preaching of nominees brings the attendance back up again!

With our very best wishes,
David and Mary Sinclair

