

Cesta Tam: Christianity without all that “religion”

“Anyone who sets himself up as “religious” by talking a good game is self-deceived. This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air.” James 1:26(*The Message*)

Jarda and I have been praying, thinking and talking about our Christian outreach in the Czech Republic since 2002. We have gone through a number of options: establishing an apostolate through our communion of churches, working with a missionary sending agency, starting our own “underground” church, and planting small “house” churches for our communion.

All of these ideas were thoroughly discussed, outlined and proposed to various leaders in our communion, fellow Christians, family and friends, both in the U. S. and in the Czech Republic. Yet the one comment that has stuck in our heads is from Bishop Bill Mikler: “Keep doing what you’ve successfully done in the past: work from your strengths!”

First make friends

We are thankful to our friend Bill for his astute comment. Bill went on to say that our business, the International Leadership Institute, gives us the perfect platform to launch our ministry.

We’ve been working in the Czech Republic for 20 years, providing executive education programs for top business leaders, American English language immersion programs for students, and career development advice for people of all ages. We’ve traveled between the US and the Czech Republic more than 50 times, bringing Americans with us to Prague, and bringing Czechs to Florida, New York City, the Northeast, and the American West.

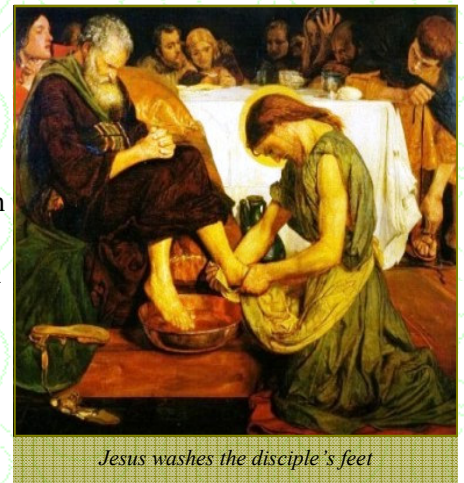
Given our experience and knowledge in delivering these programs and services, Bill suggested that we simply keep doing the same types of activities, getting to know people and earning their trust. Then, when we have developed a relationship, we can try to discuss their spiritual questions.

Avoid “religion”

This low-key approach will, we believe, be the most effective way to help Czechs get to know Christ. The evil deeds of cruelty, coercion, corruption and destruction that were

carried out over the centuries in the name of Christ and His Church have given the Church a tarnished reputation in the Czech Republic, to say the least.

To take just one example: the betrayal of Jan Hus (Bohemian priest and educator) by the Roman Church outraged the people of the Czech lands and started the Protestant Revolution in Central Europe. King of Hungary Sigismund, looking to increase his own prestige, urged the Pope to convene the Council of Constance in 1415 to deal with schismatic issues. Sigismund lured Hus (who had been preaching mild reforms in the Church) to Constance with the guarantee of safe passage. Yet when Hus arrived, he was thrown into prison for a year; he was “tried” in a mockery of justice and sentenced to burning at the stake. Hus’s followers, in their fury at this betrayal, fought off several crusades by the Pope’s invading armies and refused to accept the Church’s authority.



Jesus washes the disciple's feet

Abused by religion

The shameful, blatantly political machinations of Sigismund and of the Roman Church representatives at the Council of Constance are but one example of the historical wickedness perpetrated by the Church in the Czech Republic. The 17th century brought in an era of religious oppression: the Counter-Reformation, which combined the rule of the Austro-Hungarian empire with the authority of the Roman Church. For 300 years, the Empire and its religious arm sought to wipe out Czech language, culture, and Reformed Christian expression, replacing these vital parts of Czech identity with German language, the Hapsburg absolutist style of government, and Roman religion.

Is it any wonder that modern Czechs are a bit reluctant to receive anything coming from the Church, having been so thoroughly inoculated against the Church by the Church itself?

“Religion” today

Combined with the rule of the Czech Republic by both Nazi Germany (1939-1945) and Soviet-backed communism (1948-1989), both of which used religion as tools of repression, the Czechs are at an all-time low in terms of Christian belief. Here is an excerpt from a Radio Prague interview with Petr Wagner of the punk Christian band “Goro”:

Radio Prague: “This country is very often referred to as the most atheist country in Europe, but I know you think that is a bit of a misrepresentation. I know you are an active preacher as well, so I wanted to ask you about the sort of people who come to hear you preach – would you say that there are more actively religious Czechs than you might first think?”

Petr: “I think that our nation is not atheistic at all. It is closer to the pagan times that were in the old days, it just isn’t said. It is just lived, this kind of thing. We still have strong tendencies towards pagan kinds of thinking and beliefs; people turn towards astrology and massively towards different kinds of witchcraft, white witchcraft and such things. We even have television programmes on big television stations that deal with astrology and stuff. So, people tend to believe in something, it is just that Chris-

tianity has a really bad place in their views.”

Petr went on to say (with typical Czech understatement),

“When we are closer to the Gospel, we can be sure that the Church’s role is to be a servant, and that doesn’t mean that we will try to get as much money from the state as possible. So, we still have to have the heart of a servant, we must serve society, and serve those who don’t know Christ, and don’t know the Gospel. And the best way is by personal example, which means that we mustn’t be greedy, and that’s the thing. I think that all of the big churches here tend to be a little bit greedy.”

Avoiding “religion”

It seems clear to us that, to be effective in our Cesta Tam ministry, and to help people in the Czech Republic to become followers of Christ, we’ll do well to avoid the topic of “religion” altogether, unless it arises naturally. Our new vision and mission for the International Leadership Institute for 2010 is as follows:

ILI Vision 2010

Inspiring and equipping leaders for the economic, political and cultural challenges of the 21st century

ILI Mission 2010

Providing high-quality, relevant programs, services and publications in key areas of leadership development:

- ⇒ Language instruction
- ⇒ Career development
- ⇒ Cultural immersion

By avoiding being identified with the selfish, conceited, hate-filled “religion” too often seen in the Church, we hope to get people interested in the real Jesus Christ, Who was a friend of sinners and an enemy of hypocritical religious leaders “full of hot air, and only hot air,” as James says. Instead, we’ll follow the advice of St. Francis to talk less and do more:

***“Let all the brothers, however, preach by their deeds.”
St Francis of Assisi***