



## continuous conversion

### To be a missionary in 21st-century Europe

by Sara Tusek

Sometimes I feel a slight queasiness when mission work is the topic in the Christian circles to which I belong. My husband and I have publicly stated our intention to work as missionaries in the Czech Republic. The comments and encouragement we receive from our Christian friends about our ministry reveal on the one



St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague Castle, courtesy Dr. Z. A. Tusek

hand a sweetness and generosity we very much appreciate. Yet on the other hand, these comments reveal a range of unsupported assumptions and lack of true knowledge about the circumstances of being a missionary, and especially of being a missionary in 21st-century Western Europe, that is surprising.

It's my place as the missionary-to-be to provide more accurate and relevant information, I realize. This article is an attempt to do so.

#### WHO IS A MISSIONARY?

From a scriptural perspective, every Christian is a missionary. We are all enjoined by Jesus to witness to the Gospel and tell "the nations" about the saving love of Christ. In this sense, being a missionary is not a big deal.

Yet I've been credited with a noble and sacrificial spirit by those who know my intentions to leave my life in Florida and live in the Czech Republic.

This makes me highly uncomfortable, as living in Western Europe is no hardship. The standard of living in the Czech Republic has risen, after the 40-year domination by the Soviet Union, to a very acceptable level.

In fact, my husband Jarda, on his most recent visits to Prague, comments that the weak dollar and the strong Czech crown (koruna) mean that restaurant dining and grocery shopping are a better value there than here. The very inexpensive and efficient public transportation system means no automobile rush hours to waste time, and the pedestrian zones downtown mean you can cross a city street without fear.

The number of cathedrals, art galleries, music festivals, museums, opera houses, theaters, symphony halls, libraries, lecture halls, bookstores and church music venues insure a vibrant, thriving cultural life. And a pleasant train trip of just a few hours takes you to Vienna, Berlin, Munich, or Salzburg, while more time on the train takes you to Paris, Zurich, Milan, Venice and beyond. It will be no hardship to live in Prague; life there is stimulating and intellectually rich.

#### A SPIRITUAL GRAVEYARD

Western Europe has been described as a spiritual graveyard. Dire statistics on church attendance, when compared with American numbers, can be interpreted as indicating a vast disregard for God.

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*From p. 1* These numbers do mean something, of course. But when cultural differences are factored in, the picture changes. Polls are part of everyday life in the US, and the American obsession with “looking good” may be causing very infrequent church goers to exaggerate their attendance, especially in parts of the country like the South, where going to church is a form of social currency.

Church-goers are perceived as more honest and trustworthy than non-church-goers, so the image of going to church can advance one’s career, lend one’s family an aura of respectability, and boost one’s social standing in a community where it’s the norm to go to church. Of course, not many professed church-goers have such base motives, but the man on the street, asked if he goes to church regularly, has little to lose and much to gain by saying “yes.”

In Western Europe, in contrast, personal privacy is tightly guarded. A stranger asking personal questions can expect less-than-frank responses. Many Europeans are intensely spiritual, and believe that their spirituality is a personal matter, not open for public consumption. They see public displays of religion as “showing off.” Americans are often mocked for being so open about personal matters, and the public piety of many American figures is sometimes seen as a way to gain publicity. So the surveys are probably not getting an accurate picture of true religious belief in Europe.

### A 200-YEAR-OLD PERCEPTION

In the 19th century, missionaries were often seen as taking the Gospel to poor, disease-ridden, unclean people who had nothing. This “white man’s burden” philosophy painted missionaries as brave, self-sacrificing souls who gave up all comfort to bring the Good News to heathens—bringing them clean clothes, doctors, schools and European languages as well.

The intentions behind this work were noble and compassionate. However, in Europe, in this century, these assumptions and methods will not work. The Czech (Bohemian) culture was

in full flower in the 14th century, several centuries before Europeans “discovered” America. Charles University, Jarada’s alma mater, was founded in “Golden Prague” in 1348, three centuries before our oldest university, Harvard. Mozart and Kafka composed symphonies and wrote novels in Prague.

We are not going to the Czech Republic as bearers of superior architecture, music, medicine, sports, scientific research, language acquisition (the average educated European speaks at least four languages fluently), cuisine, film, literature (especially poetry) or drama. Jarada has his dental work done there, as it’s more expert and more reasonably priced (even factoring in US dental insurance).

### GOD’S WORK

You can see why I feel a bit queasy. Of course, we’ll miss our family, our friends, and our church when we move to the Czech Republic. We’ll miss the natural beauty of Florida, along with the clean air and mild weather. But we won’t be miserable in the Czech Republic at all. There will be compensations, as in every life change, for that which we miss.

And even it turns out to be less pleasant and comfortable to live there than here, we will be showered by our Lord with grace and mercy as we do His will. To be a missionary is God’s work, done for Him. It can never be a true hardship to do God’s work, as He always equips us when we do His will.

Missionaries are not more noble or more self-sacrificing than any normal Christian, as we are all missionaries, sacrificing our own will for His kingdom. No Christian who thinks about it seriously can deny that being in God’s will is the best place to be, whether in the US, in Europe, or anywhere else. God supplies us with our daily bread and blesses us with His abundance. He owns all the fields and all the rivers. It is from His provision that we live.

We look forward to the exciting developments of our mission service to the Lord when we make our move to the Czech Republic.

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