

The Hungarian Reformed  
Community in  
the Carpathian Basin  
and around the World



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# INTRODUCTION

## The Reformation in Hungary and the development of the Reformed church organisation

In the 16th century, at the same time as the European Reformation (indicating the tight relations between the Kingdom of Hungary and Europe), the impact of the Reformed movement appeared in Hungary too. The Swiss Reformation, particularly Calvin's teachings, rapidly gained ground in the Carpathian Basin. The General Synod of 1567 marks the birth of the Reformed Church in Hungary where two confessions were adopted: the Heidelberg Catechism and the Second Helvetic Confession. The vast majority of Hungarians became followers of Calvin by the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries, while the Lutheran Reformed Movement gained ground more among the German and Slovak speaking population of the Carpathian Basin. At this time the region was heavily divided not only ethnically and religiously, but also politically. Following the victory of the Turks near Mohács (1526) and the fall of Buda (1541) the Kingdom of Hungary was divided into three parts: the central parts of the country were under Turkish occupation, the northern and western territories came under the rule of the Habsburgs, while Transylvania had its own principedom with a Hungarian ruler. For historical reasons originating in the partitioned state of the country and the oppression and re-Catholicisation ambitions of the Habsburgs, the Reformed Church in Hungary was unable to develop within a standard structure. In the century of Reformation, six church districts were formed, but the foundations of our church constitution were only laid at the Debrecen General Synod of 1881, convened after the political compromise with Austria (1867), marking the beginning of the uniformly structured Reformed Church in Hungary.

### **The Disintegration of the Hungarian Reformed Community**

The Treaty of Trianon following World War I resulted in Hungary losing two thirds of its territory, with a large number of members belonging to the Hungarian Reformed Church finding themselves outside the borders of the country. As a result, the Hungarian reformed community today is scattered over three areas: the motherland, successor states in the Carpathian Basin and in the global diaspora. There are several million Hungarian Reformed Christians today all over the world, with approximately 1,5 million living in Hungary and nearly a million in various neighbouring countries.

Following World War I, a great number of Hungarian parishes found themselves outside our reduced borders. They continue to live in their original areas, but with foreign languages and in foreign religious environments. The Reformed Church in Hungary fosters close fraternal relations with reformed Christians living in neighbouring countries and in the global diaspora.

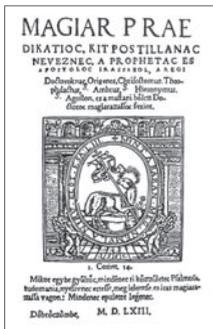
### **Reformed Community in Hungary and Culture**

During the period of Turkish occupation in the 16th and 17th centuries, the Reformed Church being in the majority was forced to take over most of the responsibilities for public education from the weakened state. Through the translation of the Bible into Hungarian, preaching and prayers in the native language and the adoption of printing and the development of the school network in the 1530s, the Reformation made

a lasting impact on the development of Hungarian literature, language, and thought. Protestantism in Hungary was culturally so strongly embedded that even the thoughts of the Enlightenment could only shake it partially. The Church lost ground in this area only in the 20th century, especially due to the nationalisation of the schools (1948).



*The Bible of Vizsoly (1590)*



*J. P. Melius preaching book*

of Theodore de Bèze and Clement Marot is the work of the scholar Albert Szenczi Molnár (1574–1634), completed just 400 years ago (*Psalterium Ungaricum*, 1607), and Hungarian Reformed churchgoers still use these texts with the Genevan tunes all over the world. However, it was primarily Hungarian reformed ministers or teachers who published the first Hungarian language lexicons, dictionaries and spelling books in

the early new age. The most important strongholds of the Reformed culture in Hungary for centuries were the famous colleges (Debrecen, Sárospatak, Pápa, Kecskemét, Nagyvárad, Nagyenyed, Kolozsvár, Marosvásárhely). Many excellent Hungarian poets, scientists and politicians were educated in those colleges, including, inter alia, the world-famous Tibet researcher, Sándor Körösi Csoma, the author of the Hungarian national anthem, Ferenc Kólcsey, the outstanding figure of 19th century national liberal politics, Lajos Kossuth, the fiery spirited poet of the 1848 Revolution, Sándor Petőfi, and the reformer of the modern poetic language, Endre Ady. These colleges educated the ministers and theologians of the Reformed Church for centuries who, by means of their university studies abroad, were constantly in



*The College in Nagyenyed (Romania)*

intellectual contact with the sources of the European Reformed Movement (Wittenberg, Geneva, Heidelberg, Oxford). Given the position of the Reformed Community in Hungary, it was the keeper of national independence of Hungary as opposed to the Catholic Vienna. It is not a coincidence that in 1849, during the most significant fight for freedom in Hungary, the traditional centre of the Reformed community in Hungary, Debrecen, became the capital of the country for a few months. What is more, the dethronement of the Habsburg-house took place in the prayer hall of the reformed college in the city. Besides the strict Biblicism, the main trait of Hungarian reformed thinking to date has been the adherence to schools as tools of missionary activities as well as patriotism.

# THE REFORMED COMMUNITY IN THE MOTHERLAND

## Birth of a Unified National Church

The desire to belong to a unified church was a permanent element of the Hungarian reformed church thinking. After four years of preparation, the Debrecen General Synod opened its session on 31 October 1881. This Synod laid the foundations of the new church constitution. The three fundamental principles in establishing a unified church: a majority system of decision-making, collective government and the parity principle. Two central authorities were established: the General Synod, held every 10 years as the supreme legislative assembly of the church, and the Universal Convent, representing the national church between the meetings of the General Synod. In organisational terms therefore this was the beginning of the Reformed Church in Hungary which was unified as a whole but still comprised autonomous districts.

### **The Church in the Years of Communist Oppression**

After World War II the state made efforts to regulate its relations with churches through a convention passed in 1948. The practice of fair relations with churches was completely inconsistent with communist ideology and power politics. The land of the church was seized, its schools were brought under state control and religious instruction in schools was removed. Public and internal life of the Reformed Church was marked by a great number of decisions made by the state party following communist ideology that was brought to power with Soviet support amid the political conflicts after the war. Until the revolution of 1956, the church and its members were openly exposed to daily atrocities, just like any other citizen of the country who was not willing to conform to the official, “victorious” state

ideology at the time. Following the suppression of the 1956 freedom fight, church revolutionaries were also hit hard by retribution and punishment. László Ravasz, reinstated as bishop at the time of the revolution, was removed from public church life for good at this time. Later, the social effects of political consolidation were felt in church life as well.



*The Great Church (Debrecen, Hungary)*

From the perspective of state power, retiring to within the church walls was considered a virtue, while public appearance was only recommended if asked.

The vision of the church as well as the membership and composition of individual congregations went

through substantial changes in the years of dictatorship. The intention of the state dating from 1948 was to undermine the social base of the churches, educate the young as atheists and strive to hinder the administration of church institutions. Applying the principle of "oust the shepherd and the flock will disperse" led to a series of show trials against the churches.

### Present Day of the Hungarian Reformed Church

The political changes in 1989 freed Eastern European nations and their churches from the Soviet system of communist state-party oppression and isolation. In Hungary, the State Office for Church Affairs, the regulatory authority established by the former state party was shut down. By 1990, Act IV on the freedom of conscience and religion and churches was passed. Section 1 in the first chapter of the Act provides that *"The freedom of conscience and religion is a basic human right granted to every human, the unobstructed practice of which is ensured by the Republic of Hungary."*

Following the political changes, recent times have seen more intense church life and more meetings that foster relations between congregations. Religions life is again freely practised outside the church building, with opportunities for the future presented by youth camps, local and international church

stitutions and 11 conference facilities. Religions education takes place in four cities (Debrecen, Budapest, Sárospatak and Pápa). The institutional work of the church is supplemented by that of ministers, elders, teachers and church musicians and civil organisations representing the interests of those active in different branches of mission work and youth associations.

### Organisational Structure of the Reformed Church in Hungary

The 1196 parishes that make up the Reformed Church in Hungary today are organised into 27 presbyteries. Each presbyteri is led by the pastoral dean and the lay curator. Presbyteries assist the service of congregations in their area, organise their missionary, educational, diaconical and financial activities, and also act in a supervisory and controlling capacity as superior church



Reformed "Board" Church, Miskolc (Hungary)

events, religious television and radio programmes. Currently, the Reformed Church in Hungary has one hospital, 64 diaconical institutes, 122 educational in-



Calvin-square Reformed Church (Budapest, Hungary)

authorities. The presbyteries are organised into four church districts, the Danubian, Transdanubian, Cistibiscan and Transtibiscan districts. The leadership of each district consists of a bishop and a lay curator. The 100-member General Synod is the supreme legislative and executive body of the Reformed Church in Hungary. The Synod elects its pastoral and lay president from the leadership of the church districts.



# HUNGARIAN REFORMED BELIEVERS IN THE DIASPORA

## Emigration and Political Refugees at the Turn of the Century

Beside the originally Dutch, German or Scottish Calvinist churches in the United States, there are Hungarian reformed communities there too as result of migration. From the late 19th century until the beginning of World War I, approximately 1.5 million people emigrated to North America from Hungary, hoping for a better life. A new wave was set off by the Depression in the 1930s, followed by an increase in the number of political refugees during the communist dictatorship. The suppression of the 1956 revolution led to yet more Hungarians leaving the country giving rise to an unparalleled wave of solidarity in the host countries. At this time, Western Europe, Australia and South-American countries were popular for Hungarian emigrants.

### Organisational Issues of Church Life

Care for the Hungarian reformed community in the diaspora is supported by several organisations. The pastoral care for Hungarian Protestants in the vast West European diaspora started in 1944. The Hungarian reformed community living in 80 congregations of 15 Northern and Western European countries is co-ordinated by The Hungarian Reformed Christian Pastoral Service in Western Europe. The Service is a framework organisation based on Synod-Presbyterian principles. It is dedicated to preserving the traditions and spiritual values of the Hungarian Reformation, as well as fostering integration into the churches of host countries, where possible retaining the Hungarian language and liturgy.

In North America, several church organisations contain Hungarian reformed congregations. In the United

States, the most important of these is the autonomous Calvin Synod belonging to the United Church of Christ. The Hungarian Reformed Church in America is an independent organisation, while several congregations of Hungarian origin operate within Presbyterian church communities.

Hungarian reformed communities in Canada, although belonging to three different church sections, are organised into the Hungarian Ministerial & Elder's Association of Canada. Of the three church sections, the group belonging to the Canadian Presbyterians is the largest.



*Opening of the 5th World Gathering of Hungarian Reformed Believers*

### Concerns of Reformed Hungarian in the Diaspora

Belonging to a church community plays an important role in adopting the culture and customs of a foreign country. This applies especially to political refugees, whose emigration was not motivated primarily by



*Reformed Church at Kőröslő (Romania)*

economic factors. The greatest problem is often presented by the fact that members of the diaspora are dispersed, living great distances not only from the motherland but also from each other. Due to the difficulties involved in keeping up relations, these communities have in many cases developed in different ways.

The question may arise whether adherence to national culture, traditions and language hinders integration in the new homeland. Generations raised in the language environment of the host country often do not speak Hungarian, making bilingual congregational events especially important to them, and they often only insist on their Hungarian identity as part of a cultural tradition. Under such circumstances, self-sustenance is becoming increasingly difficult for Hungarian congregations, with some disintegrating or needing financial support upon the retirement of their pastor.

#### **Relations with the Reformed Community in Hungary**

At the end of the 19th century following the emigration waves, the Reformed Church in Hungary tried to help the lives of Hungarian reformed communities abroad

by maintaining ministerial positions. After World War I, the shaky financial position of the Hungarian church made this more difficult, yet theology scholarships always brought new faces through, who helped the lives of the congregation or were able to communicate needs and demands to competent church leaders on their return.

The borders were closed during the communist dictatorships, thus keeping official contacts was difficult. The continuous flow of political refugees topped up the diaspora, the majority of whom were from well-qualified social classes, and therefore carried out important roles in the communities of the churches. The Hungarian congregations in the diaspora by this point were completely self-sustaining, and in fact, as far as possible, they endeavoured to help the Hungarian reformed churches stuck under the dictatorships.

Equal relations were only restored in the 1990s, after the fall of Communism, when with the help of various modes of co-operation and representative world gatherings it again became possible for Hungarian reformed communities in the motherland and those dispersed around the world to meet again.

# HUNGARIAN REFORMED COMMUNITIES IN THE SUCCESSOR STATES

## Historical background

As a consequence of the Trianon peace treaty bringing World War I to an end, Hungary lost two-thirds of its territory and half of its population. Although the newly-born states (Romania, Yugoslavia, Austria and Czechoslovakia) became ethnically more homogeneous than the previous set up (the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy), the several million ethnic Hungarians constitute the largest ethnic minority in Central Europe in the successor states today.

A significant difference as opposed to the dispersion resulting from emigration is that in this case, part of the population came under the rule of another state, not as the result of a voluntary and personal decision but – completely neglecting Wilson's principle of nations' autonomy – based on a political decision of the major powers winning the war.



*Worship at Bácsfeketehegy (Serbia)*

International law at this time barely recognised minority protection norms; provisions contained in the peace treaty existed only on paper. If we examine

the background to the disintegration of the artificially created Yugoslavia (originally the Serbo-Croatian-Slovenian Kingdom) in the last decade of the twentieth century accompanied by bloody warfare, where – in spite of similarities in terms of language – different religious traditions (Christianity and Islam as well as Eastern and Western Christianity) gave rise to tensions, it is easy to picture the position of Hungarian-speaking reformed churches in the minority, both in terms of language and religion, in the successor states.

### **Churches and Organisational Framework**

In 1881, the Hungarian reformed church bodies were united, before being separated again after World War I. From that point on, reformed churches in successor countries developed in an isolated manner in terms of liturgy and church law.

Since whole parts of the church and groups of communities found themselves on the other side of the motherland's borders, the church needed to be restructured, which was often only grudgingly recognised by the successor states. The state frequently and unlawfully nationalised church properties in several places and abolished the well-developed organisation of church education. Yet still, in spite of severe oppression or for reasons of the need for self-defence, churches went through a spiritual revival in God's grace between the two World Wars.

### **Dual minority**

Today Hungarian reformed communities live in an the seven neighbouring countries bordering on Hungary. The fewest live in Austria and the adjacent Slovenia in

one congregation each, while the most church members live in Romania, organised into two districts. They have had a very similar life to that of church members in Hungary after World War II due to the similar historical situation, however, circumstances arising from the linguistic and religious dual minority often made the Soviet-type communist oppression even worse.

The only exception to this was the congregation in Oberwart, *Austria*, which played a key role in taking care of political asylum seekers because this was the only community in the Carpathian Basin which had not come under the rule of communist dictatorship after World War II. The congregation became highly appreciated within the Austrian reformed community. This is best illustrated by the fact that its minister was the bishop of the entire Austrian Reformed Church for nearly two decades. The so-called “Oberwart-conference”, originating from Austria and which became a forum for the free exchange of views in theology for the reformed churches of Europe for over 30 years, made this congregation especially well known.

World War II and the later *Yugoslav* wars brought great bloodshed for the Hungarian reformed community that was just getting organised throughout the territory of the former Yugoslavia. The Yugoslav communist regime permitted relatively more freedom for churches, but the lack of institutional system (e.g. own theological education) and growing nationalism made the church’s life increasingly difficult too. By the time the artificial state disintegrated, the Yugoslavian Reformed Church had also disintegrated into several congregations with only a few members. The most significant of these is the Reformed Christian Church of Serbia.

The *Sub-Carpathian* Reformed Church belonged to Czechoslovakia up to World War II when it became part of the Soviet Union; since its collapse it has belonged to Ukraine. Compared to the position of churches taken over by other countries, its position was perhaps the hardest of all the churches in the successor states. Over one-third of ministers fled at the end of the war, and many were imprisoned or deported to Siberia. In Ukraine, the stake was not how the church would live under oppression, but whether the church could survive at all, preserve its basic functions and

whether there would be reformed preaching, reformed churches and ministers ever again. The 20th century empire of Russia with its orthodox cultural heritage knew no Protestantism, which is why it was questionable whether the Sub-Carpathian Reformed Church could obtain legal status. This had to wait until 1990. Today’s *Slovakian* Reformed Christian Church went through the hardest times after World War II in Czechoslovakia, which also disintegrated in 1993. This is because the country that took sides with the winners after World War I planned to establish a purely Slavic nation state. To achieve this, the country needed to get rid of millions of Germans and hundreds of thousands of Hungarians. To this end, the two ethnic minorities – one-third of the country’s population – were collectively declared war criminals, deprived of their citizenship and attempts were made to obtain the consent of the major powers to deport them.

The Germans were fully deported, but Hungary managed to bargain that Hungarians could only be deported officially in a number equalling the number of Slovaks in Hungary willing to relocate. In the course of forced exchange of population and as a result of other measures, hundreds of thousands of Hungarians in Upper Hungary had to leave the country of their ancestors. The situation was only settled to the satisfaction of all parties after the political changes, however, Slovakian public life is still not entirely free from measures impacting on minorities. Ministers were primarily educated at the Charles University in Prague for decades, though recently the Hungarian University in Komárom has carried out this role.



*Reformed Church Farkas Street, Kolozsvár (Cluj, Romania)*

### Outside Hungary, the largest reformed community in neighbouring countries lives within the Romanian Reformed Church

The work of the two Romanian districts is harmonised by a joint Synod and they also have joint divinity education at the Protestant Theology Institute in Kolozsvár. The history of the two territories following the Peace Treaty of Trianon went in different directions. The Reformed Church District of Transylvania, which existed at the time of the Monarchy, was seamlessly accepted by the State: pastoral education remained in Kolozsvár, and the other schools of the District also continued their work, albeit under more severe state control. The Királyhágómelléki Reformed Church District established along the border of Hungary out of sheer necessity was barely accepted as its congregations previously belonged to the Transtibiscan Reformed Church District with Debrecen as center. The uncertainty in church policy for over two decades diverted energy from the building of congregations and church



*Communion service, Kolozsvár (Cluj, Romania)*

school affairs. With the communists taking power in 1948, one of the most severe church persecutions in modern history began. In 1952 but mostly in 1956, many ministers of the reformed and other minority churches were arrested. Most of them were released during the general amnesty in 1964 when Romania received loans from the USA for the first time, and the conditions of the agreement included releasing political prisoners. History then repeated itself: following a decade of grief, a period of silent but increasing oppression commenced with great international protests against the village-destruction schemes of

Ceausescu's dictatorship. With László Tókécs being one of the driving forces behind the political changes in 1989, the building of the church was able to restart.



*World Meeting of Hungarian Reformed Believers (Subcarpathia)*

The return of illegally confiscated church properties is a key issue. As nearly every member of the Reformed Churches belongs to the Hungarian ethnic minority, the exercise of ethnic minority rights affects them directly. Frequent anti-Hungarian manifestations (sometimes similar to anti-Semitic methods in their extent and nature) repeatedly enable the Churches to sound their voices against all violations of human dignity. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the World Council of Churches took a positive standpoint in the closing statement of their last General Assembly. In spite of difficulties, tranquil church-building is naturally continuing. Congregational work is not restricted within the walls of the churches any longer. Thanks to the support received from local parishioners, the solidarity and aid of sister churches from the motherland, Western Europe and overseas, institutions are starting to revive, where the reformed church can carry out its educational, diaconical and mission work.



# TOWARDS A UNIFIED HUNGARIAN REFORMED CHURCH

## New Forms of Relations

After the political changes in the 1990s, several organisations were established with the purpose of facilitating cooperation with the dispersed Hungarian reformed community. The World Association of Hungarian Reformed Churches, established in 1991, sees its mission in the building and world-wide co-ordination of reformed spiritual life. The Consultation Synod of Hungarian Reformed Churches, established in 1995, aims to operate as a consultative, representative and demonstrative organ of the Hungarian reformed community.

The General Convent has been in operation since the summer of 2004, which is a consultative and proposal body comprising the appointed presidia of the dioceses and church districts of the Reformed Churches in the Carpathian Basin, and represents the reformed

community in the Carpathian Basin with nearly 3 million members. The consultative body was aimed at reducing the dispersion of the Hungarian-speaking reformed community due to the Treaty of Trianon in terms of religious life and church law.

The churches in the Carpathian Basin unified by the General Convent, consider the following goals important:

- mutual exchange of information,
- unified and agreed representation of interests toward world-wide church organisations and aid organisations,
- a more determined exercise of fraternal solidarity towards one another,
- examining the possibility of unified liturgy and legislation of individual churches,



*Meeting of the Reformed General Convent in the Carpathian Basin (the Consultative Body of the Hungarian-Speaking Reformed Churches, districts and presbyteries in the Carpathian Basin) 19–21 July 2007, (Sárospatak, Hungary)*



„Csillagpont” (Star point) Reformed Youth Gathering

- unification of the organisation and content of pastoral and theological education public education and higher education institutions with regard to the traditions of the individual churches and the challenges of the European Union.

### **Amendment of Fundamental Church Law in Hungary**

The Reformed Church in Hungary made a historical decision at its General Synod on 26–27 May 2005: the church membership specified in the church constitution was extended to the Hungarian reformed community living all over the world. This is because it seemed necessary that the acceptance of one another should be expressed legally too. The wording of the legal regulation clearly shows that church membership, in addition to full theoretical unity, does not endanger the autonomy of the individual churches because it states that everyone shall exercise their rights and meet their obligations at the place of their residence.

*“We hope that as a result of our mutual work, prayer and service in the grace of God, the unified Hungarian Reformed Church will be reborn in the foreseeable future.”*



Gate of the Reformed Church in Magyarvalkó (Romania)

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