

## **STRATEGY OF THE MINISTRY AMONG ROMA**

### **RECONCILIATION – HEALTH – HOPE CONCEPT OF THE REFORMED CHURCH IN HUNGARY’S MINISTRY AMONG ROMA**

*As adopted by the Synod of RCH on 25.04.2013*

#### **I. Vision Statement of the Roma Ministry**

*"Empowered by the Holy Spirit, the Reformed Church in Hungary (RCH) as a sign and agent of God's Kingdom will be a church of personal and social transformation, a community where irrespectively of origin or race, people can experience the welcoming, reconciling and healing power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ." (1)*

#### **II. Theological and missiological principles**

The basic attitude of the church's ministry among Roma (2) is determined by the value and dignity of the man as a creature. God created man to live in loving community (communio) with Him and each other, and the evolution for this community glorifies Him. All ethnical, economic, social-based distinction, hierarchical or patronizing relationships harm this relationship-system and is a sin before God. It follows that the Church considers values to be important, such as mutual respect, acceptance, understanding, discovering each other's values and enriching one another.

The Church is missional by its very nature. God shows His truth and redeeming grace to His chosen people. He blesses His people and in turn makes them blessings to all the nations. His selection is a privilege, which comes with responsibility: God called His people to be a presence and active participant of mission. In the Old Testament, Israel became an indication for God among the nations, as long it organizes its life to respect God and follow God's law regarding social life. The Gospel of the New Testament is the arrival of God's Kingdom in Jesus, the possibility of reconciliation, restoration of relationships and healing of the whole life. Jesus' life and miracles – through which He emphasized, particularly service among the poor, the outcast, the sick and those living on the margins – as well as His death and resurrection, by which He will win the final victory and open the way toward the Kingdom of God, toward the restoration of creation for all the world, speak of this.

The Church received its call to mission from the Holy Trinity God, which also determines the method of its service: As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. (3) In the Church, God's love and grace opens a new perspective for the individual and the community. Therefore the church as an alternative community is experiencing the Kingdom of God, it is its witness and sign in its environment. The church announces the Kingdom of God with hope, and it is called to organize its life according to the order of the Kingdom. It follows the welcoming of poor people, people who live on the margins, outcasts and the lifting of prejudices. Announcing the Gospel brings the hope and possibility of reconciliation, the healing of relationships and the hope of a new life, even in hopeless situations. The holistic nature of mission comes from Jesus' example, which is evidenced in words (church service and witness), in deeds (diaconia and fight for justice) and in practicing community (communio and worship). The manifestation of Jesus and His community with the downtrodden, calls the church to discover the reality and presence of Christ in the experience of those living on the margins.

The incarnation of Jesus entrusts the church the task of being the cultural embodiment of the Gospel. Every culture (4) can become a carrier of the Gospel's message, but there are elements in each culture that contradict the order of God's Kingdom. The contextualization is a missiological work, where in both communities, the Gospel confessing and the hosting, welcoming community, examines its culture with the aim of finding elements that serve the order of God's Kingdom, in which these two communities can learn from each other and enrich each other. However, at the same time it also names the "life-destroying" elements of both cultures, and against them it bravely accepts the challenge of the Gospel. This work can be done accurately only by the members of the community in dialogue with other cultures. One of the tasks of the church's Roma ministry is to nurture a new generation of Roma theologians and church leaders, who do the work of contextualization in regards to the Roma culture.

In God's Kingdom the dividing walls will crumble. In Jesus *"Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all."* (5) The church is called to embody the order of God's Kingdom, which is beyond society's definiteness. Reflecting this order of God's Kingdom, the RCH aims to help congregations become welcoming, multiethnic, God-glorifying communities, where Roma church members are also important and equal members of the community, and their culture is reflected in the culture of the congregations.

On the basis of the above mentioned, we consider the followings as basic values in our ministry:

**Reconciliation – Health – Hope**  
**Because we are the image of God in Christ!**

1. Reconciliation with God, with ourselves, with our brothers and sisters, with the created world  
The ministry of RCH among Roma people has an indispensable aspect: confessing the Gospel of God's Kingdom, which offers the possibility of reconciliation by Christ and the experiencing of real community. *"That God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God."* (II. Cor. 5:19-20)

2. Health (fullness)

The Gospel of God's Kingdom is holistic. Therefore, the ministries of the RCH among Roma serve for healing, reparation and health in all the areas of life, and they work for an environment where all dimensions of individual and community life can evolve. (Physical, spiritual, intellectual – human dignity, respect, equal opportunities, justice...)

*"I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full"* (John 10:10)

3. Hope

The RCH in its ministry steps into even humanly hopeless situations with the certainty of the victory of God's Kingdom, hoping for the healing of God and the possibility of life evolving, which gives a perspective for the future of an individual and a community.

*He will wipe every tear from their eyes* (Revelation 21:4)

### III. Situation

#### III.1. Social context

The fastest growing part of Hungary's population, an estimated 10%, is traditionally called Cigány in the Hungarian language, but is typically called Roma in some social science and political language. The census, because it is based on self-reporting, underrepresents the number of Roma. (6)

There is data showing the Roma's current focused location: 50% of the Roma population lives in 15% of Hungary's territory. Both economically and socially, the predominantly Roma areas are the most disadvantaged parts of the country. In these areas the employment rate is the weakest while the unemployment rate is the highest, most of the families live in flats without modern conveniences, the graduation rate is the lowest and the number of violent and aggravated crimes is the highest. A 2010 survey (7) shows that only 27% of the Roma population, ages 16-64, is employed, 15% are retired and 55% of households have no family member with a stable job. It follows that Roma life expectancy in Hungary is at least 10 years shorter than the average life expectancy of the entire Hungarian society. The areas with the worst indicators, where the population of Roma is very high, are most concentrated in Northeast Hungary and Southern Transdanubia, where the Reformed presence, compared with the national ratio, is also high.

In 1893, the Roma census in Hungary reported that approximately 275,000 Roma lived in Hungary at that time, and from that population around 65-66,000 people were located in Hungary's current territory. In the 1940s, the number of Roma living in Hungary likely reached 100,000, and this population has now increased to about 800,000. Regarding the Roma population, we can say that the younger generations are more populous, while the number of younger Hungarians, on the contrary, is getting smaller. It should be mentioned that while the Hungarian population decreased by more than 100,000 people in the 10 years following the regime change, the Roma population increased by 100,000 people. If we take into account the age structure of the Roma and non-Roma population, we can conclude that within a few decades the young and adult portion of the Roma population will be increasingly significant. In some areas, the future of Reformed congregations depends on whether we can share the Gospel's message with our Roma brothers and sisters, and therefore become an inclusive, integrative congregation. All this would happen in a social context not without prejudices from both sides, when tension between Roma and the majority society is present in many cases and radicalization can be seen from both sides, which political parties occasionally reinforce. However, the provisions that aim to close the gap often end in failure.

The Roma, who live within the current borders of Hungary, traditionally can be divided into three major groups: Hungarian Roma, Vlach (oláh) Roma and Beás communities - sometimes referred to as "teknővájók." Therefore, the Roma are not a homogeneous entity, but consist of several groups and subgroups whose relationships are not without tension. These groups live in different situations and require different approaches.

We have little authentic data available regarding the religious attachments of Roma in Hungary. In our region most of the Roma people belong to the Roman Catholic religion, but as we look at their religious life as a whole, it is typified as folk religion with strong ethnic elements. The

proportion of Roma in Hungary, who are historically connected to the Reformed Church – based on uncertain, but relatively old estimates – is around 20%. Over the last few decades, considerable work has been done in the Roma Ministry by Pentecostal, Baptist, Methodist and Lutheran churches as well as other smaller churches too, which diversifies the Christian religious affiliation of Roma.

### **III.2. Church Context**

In the history of the RCH, service, ministry and standing up for the most deprived, has always been present. Taking responsibility for the Roma is one of the most important ways to see this evidenced, the early signs of which appeared in the articles of Peter Meliusz Juhász, during the Debrecen Synod of 1567, the event that signifies our church's independence in the Carpathian Basin. In later sources, there is a reference to a Roma wedding reception in Nagybánya in 1613 as well as evidence of a 1626 baptism in the oldest Hungarian Reformed register.

Since the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Roma youth have appeared in Reformed higher education (David Belényesi Grausser, Mihály Császlai, Mihály Vistai Farkas, etc.), and in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, István Wáli Jr., a Reformed theology student, first discovered the “újind” nature of the Roma language, the indirect Indian origin of the Roma.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Hungarian Reformed people's ministry among Roma has still not been clearly separated from other services of the church. Fine examples of our church's presence among Roma are the ministry of János Varga, pastor of Tiszaújlak Reformed Church and the ministry of János Krajnovics, pastor of Úljaniki Reformed Church, but we can list here the Reformed Roma Ministry that slowly started to be independent in the 1900s, from Válaszút from Cluj County through Cigánd to Karcag.

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, several congregations severed among Roma the mapping of which is still in process. (9) After the change of regime, the RCH's 1995<sup>th</sup> Act II regulation – the so-called Mission Act – showed direction and defined the mission service of the last 18 years. The RCH is connected to the Roma ministries of member churches from the Hungarian Reformed Church, and is creating its mission concept considering the accumulated experiences from different fields of service. (10) Our hope is that this strategic document will contribute in shaping the future of our church.

### **III,3. Analysis of the research**

Between December 2012 and February 2013, we carried out a nationwide questionnaire survey among the congregations of the RCH. We sought to record complete data, so our goal was to reach all of the Reformed congregations. On 5 March 2013, we recorded 587 questionnaires in our database, which means approximately 700 congregations.

In general we can confirm that the vast majority of the respondent pastors typically had little knowledge about the different Roma groups or about the Roma who live in the area of their congregation in general . The lack of knowledge is also reflected in the very high number of “I do not know” responses.

The awareness seemed significantly higher regarding the presence of Roma in the congregation and their participation in the congregation's life. There is data of Roma elders in roughly 6% of the congregations (34 congregations), in 33 of these cases the congregations have 1-5 Roma

elders and in one congregation they have 5-10. In 17% of the respondent congregations (98 congregations), we found Roma people who actively participate in the church service, in six congregations more than five, in three congregations more than 10. Almost 44% of the congregations (246 places) have Roma church members who pay the church tax (17 congregations from this have more than 20 Roma church members who pay). Among the congregations that answered the questionnaire, 27% (156 congregations) answered that members of the local Roma group appear among those who attend church weekly. An even greater number of Roma take part in church life on the occasions of “kauzália”, for example pre-marital counseling, marriage or a funeral. The importance of Roma ministry is more significant among children, because 22% of the respondents (131 pastors) reported that they conduct religious lessons without a single Roma child and 52% of the pastors (in 308 congregations) said there are no Roma children in their confirmation courses, or they are not aware of them (7%, 40 congregations).

Describing the inter-ethnic relations of Roma areas, pastors declared that the relationship between the major and minor population is basically distrustful (26%, 151 pastors, answered on the contrary), but usually they did not report about the tensions (19%, 109 pastors, reported there is not, or it is much less typical that the relationship between the Roma and non-Roma populations is strained). The relations in local inter-ethnic areas throughout the country have shown a slight improvement (around 15%, 90 cases) rather than the increasing of tensions (around 10%, 57 respondents); regarding the opinion of the pastors, the recent period is a time of stagnation.

Criminal problems often occur regarding Roma. The majority of respondents mentioned that stealing occurs more often (40%, 232 places) and violent incidents less frequently (30%, 174 places). The respondents think that the conflicts, which provoke the tension, are connected to certain families (49%, 289 respondents) rather than the local, wider Roma community (the latter only approx. in 25%, 144 congregations). Very few respondents felt that all Roma in the area are the “same”; based on responses, 48% (280 pastors) realize the diversity of Roma who live in their area. Although a significant portion of pastors who responded to the questionnaire are uninformed, in most cases we cannot speak about reinforcing the stereotypes or over-generalization of anti-Roma prejudices.

It is instructive, and in the future it can be an important resource, that in 12% (73 pastors) it is very typical and for 20% (120 pastors) it is rather typical for the pastor to feel personally responsible for the ministry among Roma. However, 33% (197 pastors) gave more reserved, dismissive responses. It is important to note that for the work and service in the Roma ministry, most of the pastors miss the material resources and the financial aid much less (23%, 133 pastors), and would rather the moral support (38%, 222 pastors), specialized knowledge (54%, 322 pastors) and assistance of trained staff (60%, 350 pastors). Nevertheless, the relative openness of the pastors is less true in the case of the congregational communities. Considering the opinion of the pastors, although 53% (309 congregations) do not, or do not typically, reject Roma, but less than 5% (27 congregations) have church members who are committed to the ministry among Roma. Only 8% of the congregations (42 places) reported that the presence of Roma in the church service creates uncomfortable feelings (although most of the congregations have not experienced this). At the same time, in 123 congregations (21%) at least 1 person, and in 7 congregations (1%) at least 5 people, serve specifically in Roma ministry.

Further analysis and exploration of relations, which come from the territorial distribution of the data, are still in progress. The data and evaluation typify only the respondent pastors and

congregations, as we do not have current data from those congregations and church presbyteries that did not participate in the research. Therefore from these above mentioned results we should not conclude about national tendencies.

#### **IV. Target toward vision**

##### **IV.1. Vision**

The congregations of the RCH will strengthen in their mission identity and become open and integrating communities, which glorify the Lord, and where reconciliation with God opens new perspectives for individuals, families and the wider community. As a result of this, the social solidarity will be strengthened and tensions will be decreased in the majority and minority society. The RCH with its ministry contributes to the improvement of the people's quality of life in areas with serious disadvantages from a social, ecological and infrastructural point of view.

##### **IV.2. Overall aims**

1. Congregations of the RCH proclaim the life-shaping message for socially marginalized groups, including the large Roma community.
2. Through the ministry of the church, Roma people can experience God's restoring and healing love in all dimensions of their lives.
3. The RCH and its congregations serve the mutual reconciliation between Roma and the majority of the population.

##### **IV.3. Particular targets**

I. The congregations of the RCH proclaim the life-shaping message of the Gospel to marginalized groups, including the large Roma community.

1. The RCH congregations recognize their mission given by God toward Roma people and they undertake it.
2. The ministry among Roma appears as a priority on the presbytery, church district and Synod level of the RCH.

II. Through the ministry of the church, the Roma people can experience God's restoring and healing love in all dimensions of their life.

3. Working on the healing of personality and personal relations.
4. Offering trainings and educational projects, which give opportunities for Roma children's potentials and integration into society.
5. Supporting the improvement of healthcare in the areas that suffer from social, economic and infrastructure disadvantages and are mainly populated by Roma people.
6. Promoting job possibilities in the areas that suffer from social, economic and infrastructure disadvantages and are mainly populated by Roma people.

7. The RCH makes it possible and supports the preservation and creative maintenance of the Roma's authentic culture, whose cultural elements appear in the RCH's liturgy, alternative church service order.

III. The RCH and its congregations serve the mutual reconciliation between Roma and the majority of the population.

8. Supporting the congregations of the RCH to become welcoming, hosting, multiethnic, God-glorifying communities.
  9. Reconciliation; shaping the approach of the majority and minority society, decreasing interethnic tensions.
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- (1) *The concept of "mission" - based on theological contemplation – is not considered a special "proselytizing" field of mission, but we do consider it a mission of the church, that the church is a tool and a part of God's mission (missio Dei)*
- (2) *We do not study the debate of "Roma – Gypsy" terminology in this document.*
- (3) *John 20:21.*
- (4) *We consider culture a totality of the human community's operational standards, which determine the relation-system between two individuals, between an individual and a community, between the individual, community and nature, and between the individual, the community and the man-made word.*
- (5) *Col 3:11*
- (6) *The last representative Roma survey was distributed 10 years ago, in 2003. During this survey, one of its creators, sociological professor István Kemény and his colleagues determined the number of the Roma population within the borders Hungary to be 600,000. They tried to present the data more cautiously, so they said: "in the beginning of 2003, the number of people living in Roma households is between 520,000 and 650,000."*
- (7) *Roma Society 2010, Marketing Centrum OPK Kft.*
- (8) *The largest subgroup of Roma – who have the Hungarian language almost exclusively as their mother tongue – is the first group, the Hungarian Roma, 'Romungro' in Roma language, whose communities can be found practically all over the Carpathian Basin. While their biggest masses often live in deep poverty in Roma settlements, sometimes spectacularly wealthy people and families are also present within this group. Additionally, across the country you can find the Roma-language-speaking – "romani" – Vlach Romas, who besides maintaining the ancient, "újind" language, have quite often preserved what is considered the most traditional Roma cultural patterns and values. The so-called Beás group, who speak the archaic Rumanian language dialect and make a living doing woodwork, live mostly in Southern Transdanubia. (The most recent survey in 2003 found that 86.9% of the Roma in Hungary had Hungarian, 4.6% the Rumanian and 7.7% the Roma language as their mother tongue)*
- (9) *In this period, through the work and personality of Dr. Antal Hadrházy, Reformed pastor and sociologist, is significant. Through his work the Roma ministry of the RCH also joined the international mainstream of oikumene.*
- (10) *In the list of „best practices” the Roma ministry of the Transtibiscan Reformed Church District as a standard and the „Theoretical and practical aspects of the Roma Ministry in the Transtibiscan Reformed Church District” as a theoretical primary working documentation from 2010, are outstanding.*