Some Observations on the Hungarian Reformed Church

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A recent visit to Hungary provided an opportunity for conversation with Reformed pastors and an update on the life of the churches there. The Reformed Church Assembly met in November 1985, and made an historic decision regarding women clergy. For several years women have attended the seminaries and been ordained to the ministry. They were not, however, eligible to receive a call to serve as the pastor of a church, nor were they allowed to administer the sacraments nor serve as the moderator of church meetings. There were some churches being served by women pastors, but male pastors from neighboring congregations were brought in to carry out those duties reserved exclusively for male clergy. At the Synod all restrictions on women clergy were removed. They are now eligible to serve as pastors, to administer the sacraments, and to preside at church meetings. In theory they are even eligible to become bishops.

When I enquired whether or not church membership was growing, declining or remaining stable, I was told the answer was complicated. The population of Hungary is not growing. There has been a great migration of people from rural areas and villages to towns and cities. Thus many small churches are no longer viable. Churches in the towns have expanded their ministries to include the few remaining parishioners in the village churches. Church
attendance is noticeably greater than was the case 10 years ago.

In a report to the General Assembly of the Church District in Budapest on November 20, 1985, Reformed Church Bishop Karoly Toth reported on recent studies that have been made by sociologists regarding the life of the church in Hungary. A study by Miklos Tomka, "The Role of Religion in Contemporary Society" pointed out that whereas interest in religion is increasing, church affiliation is decreasing. Tomka states, "This has the consequence that the number of those is growing who consider themselves religious but do not belong to any church. According to the appraisals of recent years, 79-82 percent of believers who consider themselves religious do not belong to any church." Another remarkable change reported is that while formerly most of the religious people were old and living in the country "today the majority of them belong to the young, urban and highly qualified classes." In trying to explain the reasons for the change the study states that religion provides community for those who suffer from the lack of it, and gives sense to human life.

Janos Jori in a study, "Religion and Contemporary Hungarian Society" indicates that religion meets a real need even in socialist society and therefore "society lays claim to this religiosity because it is able to give sense to life, it incites men to commitment to the community, and urges them to take responsibility for things." In summary, Jori says "The Marxist view of religion has changed significantly in the last four decades."

In commenting on these studies, Bishop Toth noted that Marxist research makes a fine distinction between religion and its institutional form, the church. He also noted that it does not judge people according to their religious faith or atheism, but rather on how they are related to society and its aims. Marxist ideology continues to be antagonistic to religion, but it considers partnership
and even good cooperation with the church possible.

A study by Laszlo Rozsa confirms this point of view and notes the realization that both the churches and the Marxist Party live in the current of historic changes and are not the same as they were forty or fifty years ago.

In still another study Imre Miklos reports that the earlier view is being replaced by a more elastic atheism which does not identify religion with ignorance and does not regard religious people as reactionaries. He also points out "that the churches and denominations have built up a many-sided and valuable system of international contacts which form a very important part of our country's relations."

Bishop Toth's own comment about youth in Hungarian society reflect a point of view about the difficulties of youth not unlike that observed in American society. In response to the difficulties in finding a home, securing meaningful employment and/or making progress in one's job, many youth have turned to alcoholism, crime, or suicide. The community building of the church can play a stabilizing role and offer important social help. The fragmentation of the family brought about by the pressures of modern family life and the remoteness of the school, the nursery, the kindergarten and the workplace has had a profound impact on the life of the family. Many young people are finding life in and through the community of the church a sensible form of existence, and are willing to undergo a lot for it. In closing his remarks, Bishop Toth stated, "We need a new missionary plan, new initiatives in order that we can face the challenges of a socialist society in a constructive way, and bearing witness to Christ, we can creatively participate in forming the new life of our nation."

It will come as a surprise to many in the USA that Christian education is available in the public schools in Hungary - a practice which is illegal under
the U. S. Constitution. (Though released time for religious education off the
grounds of public schools is legal.) Parents must indicate whether or not they
wish their children to participate. The classes are taught by local pastors
with each pastor teaching the children whose parents have indicated in which
tradition they wish their children taught.

The classes in the public schools are not meant to take the place of con-
firmation classes in the local parishes. One pastor told me he announced the
day and time of the first confirmation class of the year, but not a single
student showed up. He then checked the church records and identified 25
children who had been baptized 13 years earlier. He called on each family and
urged the parents regardless of their own belief or lack of belief to encourage
their children to attend and to develop a basis for their own decision making
about religion. As a result of these calls 22 of the 25 young people are now
members of the confirmation class.

What of the future? Over fifty percent of the current Reformed Church
pastors are 60 years old or more. There is not a current shortage of pastors,
partially due to the move from the villages, but there is concern about the
future. The Reformed Church has seminaries in both Budapest and Debrecen and
enrollment fills all the available spaces. In fact 32 young people applied
for the 20 openings for first year students at the Budapest seminary in the
1985 academic year enabling the faculty to select those they felt most highly
qualified. This ability to select offers hope that the Hungarian churches
will continue their tradition of providing high quality leadership to the
church in Hungary and to the wider church. The population of Hungary is
roughly the same as that of New York City, but it has provided some of the
most distinguished leaders in the world church. For example, Bishop Toth
is on the Executive Committee of the World Council of Churches, and is a
member of the executive committee of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches,
and is President of the Christian Peace Conference. The Lutheran Bishop
Zoltan Kaldy is President of the Lutheran World Federation.

The peace witness of the Hungarian churches has also been strong.
Reformed, Lutheran, Orthodox, Roman Catholic and the free churches have
cooperated on peace concerns. Evangelicals in Hungary have not been members
of the ecumenical Council. However, last year Bishop Toth was invited to
speak to over 200 evangelical pastors on the theological basis for church
peace work and afterwards the Evangelicals voted to cooperate with the Ecumeni-
cal Council on peace concerns.

Obviously over the 40 years since the end of World War II, both the church
and the state have made adjustments in how they perceive one another. The
determining factor has seldom been ideological purity. Pragmatic considerations,
as in other societies, have often been decisive. Living in a society that has
no pretense of being a Christian society, but proclaims itself to be a humani-
tarian society, has stimulated Hungarians and other Eastern European
Christians to think deeply about what it means to be a Christian in such a
society and what it means to be the church.