

## **Report on visit to Hungarian-speaking Reformed Churches in Transylvania, 27-31/10/2018**

### **History/Context:**

The Community for Reconciliation – Romania Concern has had a long-term partnership with the Királyhágómellék (King's Pass) Reformed Church District in Transylvania, Romania.

The Hungarian-speaking church is the largest Protestant denomination in Romania. It is split into two districts: Transylvania in the east, and Királyhágómellék in the west. It has sister churches in Hungary, Slovakia, Ukraine, Serbia, Croatia & Slovenia. Since 2015, when Janos Antal shared at a meeting at Rowheath Pavilion, the Fellowship of Churches of Christ have also been building a partnership with the Reformed Church district. Following his visit, we sought to develop exchange visits with Reformed Church pastors shadowing UK ones, and young people from the UK supporting youth camps in Romania. A Reformed church pastor Attila spent a week with Centrepont Church, West Bromwich and David and Denise Marsh paid a return visit to his church in Kemér. We unsuccessfully tried to arrange for Julie Hlawndo to travel to assist at a youth camp in Romania. Janos Antal and Bishop István participated in the Europe themed FCC Create Conference in 2016.

### **My Visit:**

I flew from Luton Airport to Debrecen, Hungary, from where I was collected by pastor Attila, and spent the first few days at his village church in Kemér. It is a rural, predominantly Hungarian speaking community. There was also a small Gypsy community who appeared to be living in very poor conditions. The Church owns three buildings: a church, a Sunday school/offices/guest rooms and a manse. They had recently spent money restoring the church roof, the church hall/Sunday school/guest rooms and the manse. However, the main church building clearly still had serious issues with damp and the organ was out of order – a keyboard was in use instead. The church, which held 150-200, was pretty much full for the morning service. Men and women sat separately, all ages were present, but the older generation predominated. Children were in the adjacent building for a simultaneous Sunday school. The worship which was very traditional, including hymns and an academic sermon. I was interviewed and invited to bring a greeting and a brief message. The afternoon service which had a guest speaker was also well attended, although less men were present.

I learned that Attila no longer organises the district wide youth camps, but still runs them for his own young people, with whom links/exchanges would be possible.

On the Monday morning I was driven to the Reformed Church district offices in Oradea. I stayed at a church guest room in a Reformed Church in a suburb of Oradea.

I met and took greetings to Bishop István and was introduced to a range of projects which the church seeks to provide, largely through their social mission wing Diakonia. These included:

- a) Home Care: daily support for elderly folk – including personal care, accompanying to appointments, medical services, provision of frames, crutches etc.
- b) Lampas Foundation: focussing on Domestic Violence and People Trafficking. They provide an education and advice service to identify and protect the victims of

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domestic violence in their region. They also educate people on the issue. Currently the only domestic violence shelter in the district is a state-run one for mothers with small children. A consequence of this is many victims returning to their abusers.

They are also actively involved in warning those considering work in the west of the dangers of people trafficking. Materials are produced in Hungarian and Romanian.

c) BeanBagBee Sheltered Workshop: I visited a workshop staffed by 4 young women with disabilities which manufactures bean bags and cushions for home and export markets. I have brought home a sample cushion. These can be personalised for events or organisations.

d) Gypsy Mission: an outreach to Gypsy families, particularly children. They run an after-school club, providing games, crafts, academic input and food.

I also had the opportunity to join in an English lesson with Janos at the Church's Hungarian speaking private University: the majority of the students I met stated they intend to leave the country on graduation.

### **Key Issues:**

a) the Hungarian speaking community as a whole, including the churches is suffering from high levels of migration of its young people to the west, particularly Germany and the UK. This is particularly the case amongst graduates and is removing the potential leadership of church and society for the future, as well as the Government's tax income. Reasons given included lack of economic opportunity, corruption, low pay, poor health care/social security. There is also a concern that social engineering by the government means that the Hungarian culture of Transylvania is being eroded. The Government are financing new Romanian Orthodox Churches in Hungarian speaking areas. Nevertheless, local Reformed church attendance appears to be in the hundreds everywhere, including rural areas.

b) The church faces financial challenges. There are still properties confiscated in communist times which have not been returned to them. They currently receive state aid towards pastors' salaries but are uncertain how long this will continue. All 300 churches in their district currently have their own pastor. Many of their pastors are young and relatively inexperienced, as theological training was severely restricted in the Ceausescu era. They rely financially on the tithing of their reformed community and some assistance for social projects from overseas partners, especially from Germany and Switzerland.

c) They are currently still effectively operating their mission on a Christendom model. This is still proving effective, in a society where to be part of the Hungarian minority still means to identify as protestant, and usually as Reformed. They are aware that some of the younger generation do not identify in this way, and that they will in due course face the challenges of secularisation.

### **Some UK/Romania Church Partnership Opportunities:**

**a) bringing more Hungarian-speaking pastors to the UK** to shadow British ones: this could be of value but would be most beneficial if it was settings that had managed to transform their traditional churches into more innovative ones. This in turn could lead to more **church twinning**.

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### **b) Short-term volunteer exchange:**

Send young adults (18+), to teach English at a summer camp for young people from the Kemér Church- could also use music and dance/drama skills.

Bring young adults (18+) from Romania to assist at a UK church holiday club or camp involving Hungarian or Romanian speaking UK children/youth – could also teach Hungarian folk dance.

### **c) Longer-term volunteers:**

Volunteers from the UK to Romania to work in social projects : e.g. Gypsy Mission, orphanage or old-people's home (under construction).

Volunteers from Romania to the UK to work with churches/projects doing outreach amongst Hungarian and/or Romanian speakers.

### **d) Partnerships: anti-trafficking and combatting domestic violence.**

Investigate the possibility of linking Lampas Foundation with Stop the Traffik and/or Hope for Justice (via Centrepont?) in the UK. Possibility of workers from UK visiting to share warning stories or producing videos.

Investigate funding for 1) anti-trafficking work and/or 2) a shelter for abused women (currently only one for those with small children).

### **e) Promote Sheltered Workshop:**

Assist in providing a UK market for the BeanBagBee Sheltered workshop.

### **f) Hosting Hungarian Congregations**

A previous suggestion was that UK churches could host Hungarian-speaking church plants (of which there appear to be few in the UK). An obvious difficulty however would be who would lead them.

### **g) Investigate US/Romanian partnerships:**

Talk to US mission partners about the possibility of longer-term workers from the US for the projects under c) above.

Facilitate conversations between the Reformed Church and Globalscope about a possible Canvas style operation in Romania.

Investigate possible US partners for Lampas Foundation.

### **Further information:**

#### **Community for Reconciliation – Romania Concern:**

<http://www.cfr.me.uk/international-work/romania-concern/>

#### **Királyhágómellék Reformed Church District:**

<http://www.kiralyhagomellek.ro/english.php>

**Diakonia:** [http://www.diakonia.ro/index\\_en.php](http://www.diakonia.ro/index_en.php)

**Lampas Foundation:** [www.lampas.ro](http://www.lampas.ro) (not working) &

<https://www.facebook.com/pg/LampasFoundation/>

**BeanBagBee:** [www.beanbagbee.eu](http://www.beanbagbee.eu)

**Andy Vail 11/2018**