

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A MISSIONARY CHURCH TODAY?

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In order to formulate an answer to this question

- I. We have to devote a little time to describe what we mean by church in relation to mission.
- II. It is equally important to sum up what has grown out of our experiences concerning the situation of the world in these days: i.e. what are the characteristics of today?
- III. We need to point out the most important emphases of today's mission that we have to take into consideration.

### **I. Church and Mission.**

There seems to be a fundamental agreement developed during the ecumenical era among theologians that mission is not one of the many tasks of the church, but it is the most important aspect and element of the church's existence; the reason for the church being called out of the world by God the Creator and Redeemer to be healed by getting a share of the life of God in Christ. Having become participants together of the life of God church members are sent back into the world. This being sent is of fundamental significance. The being sent is not the beginning of the process of sending for the Church, but is the result of God sending God-self into the world. John 20:19-23 gives a description of the dynamism of the sending. The Son had been sent by the Father. Due to his being one with the Father, he had participated in his own sending ( St. Augustine), which has been carried out by the power of the Holy Spirit.

This deeply Trinitarian and fundamentally biblical understanding of mission was brought to light in the course of the dramatic search for orientation and for a theology relevant for the times full of crises. One year before the Nazi *Machtergreifung* [grab for power] Karl Barth expressed the view that mission is the activity of God himself.<sup>1</sup> It is the mission of God (*Missio Dei*). It is the privilege of the church, as the People of God and as the Body of Christ to have a part in it. (Heidelberg Catechism, 32) The Church is not sent into the world alone, but by virtue of being with Christ and in Christ she is participating in the life of God and so in the movement of God's love towards humankind. Thus in mission the Church lives and experiences the fullness of her existence. The source and fullest expression of that "mystic, sweet communion" is the celebration of the Eucharist where--being fed by the body and blood of Christ--our participation in his Body is re-created and strengthened.<sup>2</sup> This celebration is possible, because God, who has sent Himself to his people and gives himself to them in Christ, who in turn send them out to carry on his mission in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Along with the re-discovery of these aspects of ecclesiology this Trinitarian concept has proved to be essential in dealing with the questions of mission. The important characteristic of this Trinitarian approach is that the various issues and elements involved in it belong organically together. That can be demonstrated by Scriptures witnessing to the two most significant ways of talking about the Church and the relationship of these two ways.

The church is described in the Scriptures as the People of God and the Body for Christ. As the people of God she is an empirical reality which has been present in history since creation (Heidelberg Catechism 54) telling about God' saving activities by its very existence. It is not one of the mighty powers of the world (Deut 7:6-8), but by the direct involvement of the Lord God. This people bears witness to the saving activity of God telling the world about his redeeming love to all nations.

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<sup>1</sup> Brandenburg Missionary Conference 1932. David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 389-390.

<sup>2</sup> One of the significant aspects of the relationship of Baptism and Eucharist is that we are baptized into the Body (1Cor 12:13), and our being in it is made renewed by participation on the body and blood of Christ in the Communion (1Cor 10,16-17). As Heinz-Dietrich Wendland puts it: "... vorausgesetzt wird die Einheit Christi mit seinem Leibe (der ganze Christus der = Christus und die Kirche), also Christus und sein Leib als eine Gesamtperson....Kirche sind konkrete, geschichtliche Menschen als solche, die an Christus teil haben." in *Briefe an die Korinther* (Göttingen: V&R, 1968), 111. And again: „Die Kirche ist...eine sakramental begründete Gemeinschaft...durch den göttlichen Geist geschifteten und erfüllten Gemeinde...Auch das Pneuma muß ja geschichtlich werden und wirken; das geschieht im Herrenmahl wie in der Taufe.“ *op.cit.* 81.

The other important concept of the Church is that it is the Body of Christ. The people is a historical reality open to investigation by all.<sup>3</sup> The Church as the Body of Christ carries a mystery, which is a reality only for those who believe, and have sensitivity for mysteries. However, for those of faith it is a reality. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his *Christology* asserts: "The community is the Body of Christ. Body is here not a metaphor."<sup>4</sup> In explaining this he says: "That Christ is pro me is not an historical...statement, but an ontological one. That is, Christ can never be thought of in his being in himself, but only in his relationship to me. That in turn means that Christ can only be conceived of existentially, viz. in the community."<sup>5</sup>

Leslie Newbigin takes the matter further in asserting that the community is brought into being by Christ; its members are deeply rooted in him. This community, the Church has Christ within herself. Therefore she is a new ontological reality in history which shares the life, sympathy, and suffering; i. e. mission of Christ.<sup>6</sup> The appearance of this phenomenon calls for explanation that leads to the proclamation of the Gospel.<sup>7</sup> The same idea is expressed by Anna Marie Aagaard working out the Trinitarian concept of mission, when she speaks about God in Christ identifying himself with a particular people.<sup>8</sup>[8] The two aspects of the one reality: People of God and Body of Christ sent by Him in such a way that He himself goes along within them. This dialectic expresses that greatness of the mystery of the Church and of that of mission.

From the point of view of our topic it means that there is an indissoluble union between the Church and mission. But the Church lives in history in particular situations over the ages. Now is the time to look at the situation today.

## **II. What about the Contemporary Scene ? What about Today?**

There are many ways of describing the human condition. It has been said to be post-Christian, post-Communist, post-Industrial, post-Constantinian and post-Modern. Each one of

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<sup>3</sup> During the times of the party state we have seen an immense amount of anti-Christian literature that described the church as a rotten and immoral company. However, there was none that would have questioned the historical reality of the Church.

<sup>4</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christology*, (London: Collins-Fontana, 1966), 60.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>6</sup> Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, (London: SPCK, 1989), 136.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>8</sup> Anna Marie Aagaard, "Missio Dei in katholischer Sicht," *Evangelische Theologie*, vol. 34, 420-433.

these would give us important insights into the characteristics of the era we live in. We will select here one of them, the post-Modern, which seems to offer a more comprehensive description of the scene of today than the others. The principal characteristics of the post-Modern are the following:

1. The unlimited optimism of the modern--arising from the Enlightenment--is over. For centuries humankind looked forward towards the future with high expectations. Originally this looking into the future with expectation was brought into history by the People of God, Israel, and the Church as they received God's promises and experienced their fulfillment. Each fulfillment was coupled with new promises. That is how the people of God has been described as the one marching towards its fulfillment be it the Promised Land or the Heavenly Kingdom (Hebrews 4:3;12:1).

Within the dynamics of European thinking after the Cartesian turn<sup>9</sup> and the development of the Enlightenment this expectation was cut off from the promises and experiences of fulfillment of the Scriptures and became secularized supported and strengthened by philosophical and technological development. The successes and great achievements of the latter contributed towards the strengthening of that optimism. This--we might call secularized eschatology--was not based upon God's act and promises, but upon the inner dynamics of history: history itself would bring out of itself its own salvation. The successes of early aviation technology of pre-World War I motivated the great newspapers of those days in London, Paris and Berlin to write about the coming of universal peace as aircrafts would bring together people into one family and would exclude the possibility of war. Then came the Great War that shook this confidence in most circles at least for the time being.<sup>10</sup> However it would gain new vigor right up to our own days when the internet, e-mail and www. connect people over the continents, and make us all amazed. After the collapse of the Soviet Empire Francis Fukuyama announced the arrival of the end of history and of perfect society.<sup>11</sup> A few years later he, too, had to change his views.<sup>12</sup> The shock of the

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<sup>9</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *Der evangelische Glaube* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr[Paul Siebeck], 1968) Band I, 22-26.

<sup>10</sup> That crisis initiated the main stream of theological renewal around Karl Barth and many others which remained consistent in not being carried away by the re-emerging optimism fed by new "miracles" of science .

<sup>11</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, (New York: Free Press, 1992).

<sup>12</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The Great Disruption Human Nature and the Reconstruction of Social Order* (New York: Free Press, 1999).

tragedy September 11 in New York City and Washington DC summed up the growing feeling of discomfort, anxiety and despair.

2. During the first Semester of the academic year 2000/2001 eight theologians from five continents--I was privileged to be one of them--discussed and struggled with the problems of mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The product of those discussion appeared in a volume.<sup>13</sup> Studying the world situation "there has emerged the consensus that the prevailing mood of humankind globally considered must be named "despair."

Despair means literally the negation, diminution, dearth of hope. In the absence of public expectancy strong enough to generate viable policies of meaning and direction, human beings and communities are abandoned to the mercies of leaderless systems...and false promises. The modern vision, the rhetoric of which still informs much of public life of the world's possessing peoples, has failed visibly. Although its failure is cushioned by the present (likely temporary) economic and technological successes of the so called developed world, the condition of the dispossessed peoples of the planet is worsened by the incapacity of the possessing peoples for either self-knowledge or planetary responsibility. There is a clear connection between the hidden despair of those who "have" and the open despair of those who do not. By far the more problematic form of despair, on account of both its repressive character and the questionable foundations of its assumed optimism, is the covert despair of the affluent. The greatest test of the Christian message in our time is whether it is able to engage and transform that despair."<sup>14</sup>

I do not think it is necessary to enter into describing the details of the kind of despair. The figures and descriptions of situations are known to us. There are forty million refugees in the world, and three children die of hunger every minute. We are also familiar with the empty and meaningless life of many of the affluent. The shocking depth of the selfishness of the affluent is mirrored in the Australian rejection of 450 Afghan refugees who were dying on the deck of a cargo-boat, or in the apparent selfishness of the European governments and peoples as they try to figure out what loss of their affluence will come about when the poor nations of the countries previously ruled by the Soviets will join in.<sup>15</sup> The same kind of selfishness is reflected in the attitude of the population of a Hungarian city which wanted to

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<sup>13</sup> Walter Brueggemann (ed.), *Hope for the World Mission in a Global Context*, (Louisville Kentucky: Westminster John Know Press, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>15</sup> Against their expressed desire in accordance with the decision of the victorious powers of World War II at Yalta.

reject a few hundred refugees who sought asylum in their midst. These examples also give us indication how the post-Modern is characterized by a loss of values and principles.

Considering these signs it seems extremely difficult to live in hope “against hope” which is the privilege of the Christian community in celebration of the Eucharist that is both the foundation and end of that hope. Thus to be united with Christ binds the community to celebrate the Christ-event as the continuation of that celebration “out in the world” of despair and abandonment in empathy and action, in the unity of word and deed.

3. What are the main challenges of our own situation living in one of the countries previously ruled by the Soviets? We are being called post-Communist. I have never been able accept that my land was a “Communist country.” It was a land subjugated and ruled ruthlessly by a foreign power that was Communist, the Soviet Empire.<sup>16</sup> We were-- and are -- a country in the very heart of Europe by the river Danubius (Danube) with our ancient culture that had grown together with the Judea-Christian and Graeco-Roman heritage of our continent.

The long awaited changes took place in 1989. At that time, the idol statue collapsed “not by human hands”. (Dan 2:34.45) There was a tremendous sense of relief and joy, and society was able to set up democratic structures and institutions which had been familiar to us, but had been destroyed several times by foreign powers.<sup>17</sup>

Doors long closed for Christian ministry were opened: trade unions, municipalities, re-emerging civic organizations expressed their desire for the ministries of the church. New impulses for the education of children, and for youth work presented themselves, along with new opportunities for Christian witness.<sup>18</sup>

Unfortunately after 1989 came the bitter disappointment. The countries of our area--the victims of the post WW II political decisions--were not given the same help that was given to the great adversary after 1945. We were left without sufficient financial help, and our existing markets and economic possibilities also collapsed for various reasons<sup>19</sup> with the

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<sup>16</sup> Hungarians voted twice against that system in two elections of 1945, 1947 and again in 1956.

<sup>17</sup> 1242. Mongolians, 1526-1686 Ottoman (Turkish) Empire, 1848 Austrian (Hapsburg), Russian, 1944 German, 1948 Soviet invasion.

<sup>18</sup> It has to be emphasized that children’s “services” and youth work had been carried on in many congregations during the period of Communist domination. Again areas were different, and so were characters.

<sup>19</sup> The economic chaos of Russia, the Balkan wars, the latter causing Hungarian export to the Near and Middle East destroyed, the mistakes committed by international and Hungarian experts in the course of privatization which was the first ever experience in history to manage the transition from a dictatorial, highly centralized bureaucratic economic system into the free market system.

result that the standard of life of the great majority of the population fell much below the 1989 level. The gap between “haves” and “have-nots” has grown ever since with all the social and political problems involved. At the same time society is in such a moral and psychological situation which cries out for help.

4. In spite of the new opportunities of carrying out the witness of the Church serious obstacles and problems emerged. The problems are so manifold that it takes great effort to sum them up in a report..

We have to acknowledge with gratitude that many congregations and diaconal ministries which had existed during the years of oppression – along with newly established ones--continued and worked with new vigor. (One of the significant organizations for mission among students and intellectuals was the *Soli Deo Gloria* Association with a famous conference center at Balatonszárszó where even during the war the Gospel was communicated very effectively. After 1989 the inheritance and tradition of Szárszó could make a new start. Conferences and study weeks have been organized. However, the Hungarian secularized intelligentsia and other layers of society alienated from the Church could not be reached effectively. In certain places the integrity of the Church has been questioned. The Church as a whole did not present the Gospel in the midst of society with real credibility and power.

There are several reasons for this. Some of the problems will be listed below:

a) There has been no “collective” recognition and confession of our sins. (Nehemiah 9; Daniel 9). It was symbolic that when the first freely elected General Synod was opened with a service of thanksgiving, no prayer of confession at the beginning of the service was offered. Many people were engaged in trying to justify their own behavior, or to hide their collaboration, or to present their own merits, some of which had not been there at all!<sup>20</sup>

b) A thorough analysis of all aspects of church life during the forty years has not yet taken place. The analyses of the role of church leadership have been partially carried out; however, these dealt with only certain limited aspects of the life of the church during those

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<sup>20</sup> There were some notable exceptions. Professor István Török of Debrecen, who had been forced to retire around 1970 because of his open critique of the previous church policies, emphasized in a paper published in 1990 that the precondition of real renewal is for all of us to accept the burden of our own failures. In spite of being a victim he also included himself. Cf, “A megújulás teológiai feltételei” (The theological preconditions of renewal.) *Confessio* 1990/1, 122-124.

years.<sup>21</sup> The most important events – the witness of congregations in terms of preaching, education, Christian living and diaconia – have not been thoroughly examined. Just as we had people who went to the extremes in being servile to the party-state. Now we have others,- or the very same persons,- who go to the other extreme of indiscriminate anti-Communism which is a growing fashion in Hungary in these days.<sup>22</sup>

c) I have been involved in the life of the Church since the early forties up till today, and am convinced that one of the most important issues is in our critical examination of the forty years of what has often been termed the Babylonian captivity is the controversial issue of “theology of the serving Church.” In the midst of tensions of those days, many in the church struggled to discover exactly what attitude was appropriate. Among these emerged the view about the serving role of the church in society. First it was spoken of as ‘the vision of the serving church’<sup>23</sup> It was not a new idea, even less was it a Hungarian invention as was claimed by some. It was a rediscovery of an ancient biblical concept built on the vision of the church about Jesus Christ being the fulfillment of the prophecies of Deutero-Isaiah expressed by Mk 10:45, “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but serve.”<sup>24</sup> In the Constantinian period with the transformation of the Church into a triumphalistic, victorious community, the servant concept faded away.<sup>25</sup> With the coming of pressures and hostility

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<sup>21</sup> István Szabó. *Egyházvetetés és teológia a Magyarországi Református Egyházban 1948 és 1989 között*, (Church Leadership and Theology in the Reformed Church in Hungary between 1948 and 1989) (Budapest: KGRE doctoral dissertation, 1994); Jos Colijn, *Wer mag wider uns sein? Bruchstellen in der Kirchen- und Theologiegeschichte der reformierten Kirche Ungarns nach dem II. Weltkrieg* (Kampen: 1992).

<sup>22</sup> One has to realize that the political changes in 1989 did not take place by means of armed revolution. Certain leaders of the Communist party were ready to help in dismantling the old system. Many of them only to serve their own economic interests, others with sincere dedication to contribute with the reconstruction of democratic society.

<sup>23</sup> As Bishop Albert Bereczky put it: “The image of the Reformed Church, renewed in repentance, faith and thanksgiving, which has the happy privilege to serve, work, and build in this country of Hungary, in matters of spiritual and material, having no other claim than follow the Lord, who did not come to be served, but to serve... May the Lord accept this dedicating ourselves.” Quoted by János Pásztor, in: “The Theology of the Serving Church and the Theology of Diaconia in the Protestant Churches and their Consequences in Hungary During the Time of Socialism.” *Religion in Eastern Europe* Vol. XV/6. December 1995. p. 25.

<sup>24</sup> Christ as Servant is referred to in early eucharistic prayers. e.g. “The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus of Rome” in: Lucien Deiss, *Springtime of the Liturgy: Liturgical texts of the First Four Centuries* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1979).

<sup>25</sup> The concept of God was also transformed after the image of the great kings and emperors. Jürgen Moltmann, *Der gekreuzigte Gott das Kreuz Christi als Grund und Kritik christlicher Theologie*, (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1973) p. 236. Available also in English translation: *The Crucified God...* [27] That was the vision of Bonhoeffer in prison: The Church experiences transcendence (*Transzendenzerfahrung*) in Christ who is present for the world. The witness of the Church is carried out in doing the same. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand und Ergebung*, (Hamburg: Siebenstern Taschenbuch Verlag, 1971). English

towards the Church this ancient concept was bound to come to surface.<sup>26</sup> It did render an important service in fixing goals and shaping attitudes. It is the witness of the Holy Scriptures that God is for the world. He entered his creation in the Son for humankind and is present through His Spirit even in dark periods of history. The Church's privilege and duty is to participate in Christ' service. building upon his promises and commands. The Church is not to accept privileges in society but to be present for it, and so live out the Gospel.<sup>27</sup>

Unfortunately this deeply biblical concept was distorted, and misused by corrupted theologians or implanted agents. In their hands it became an instrument of rendering unscrupulous services to the powers-that-be. Thus it was turned into a means of oppression and exploitation. Most of its critics – after the collapse of the party-state – tended to dismiss the whole concept.<sup>28</sup> According to the conviction of the present writer it would amount to a disastrous loss for the mission of the Church today.<sup>29</sup> The Scriptures bear witness that the most difficult periods in the life of God's people have always been both those of judgment and renewal.

The Lord did not abandon Israel in the Babylonian exile. God remained faithful to the Covenant. He went along with the people, humiliated and tortured, and shared their sufferings. (Ezek 11:16-9) Israel was given new visions of their own role and place among nations. A scholar of that era writes about Deutero-Isaiah, the great prophet of the Exile: "The main theme is the revelation DI makes of the nature and purpose of God in His immanence in Israel as the Servant of the universe."<sup>30</sup>

The 16-17th century experiences of the Hungarian Reformation also meant enrichment in spite of serious problems. That was the daily experience of many

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translation: *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

<sup>26</sup> Within the community of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches this concept was also brought forward. The topic of the Sao Paulo General Council (1960) was: "The Servant Lord and His Servant People". papers on the subject delivered by Paul Lehmann, James I. McCord, Wilhelm Niesel, Richard Shaull, et al in: Marcel Pradervand (ed.) *Sao Paulo Story* (Genève: Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1960). Two successive presidents of the Princeton Theological Seminary have read papers on this subject. Alexander J. Mackay in Budapest in the late fifties, James I. McCord in Debrecen (1967).

<sup>27</sup> George A. F. Knight, *Isaiah 40-55 Servant Theology* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1984), 5.

<sup>28</sup> István Szabó, "A Long Period of Inner Bleeding: The "Theology of Service" as a Reflection of the Miseries as of the Reformed Church in Hungary" in: *Kirchliche Zzeitgeschichte* 1989/1 pp. 191-198.

<sup>29</sup> If we keep in mind and record only the activities of collaborators and of people of weak character, we distort the real state of our church. In that case, coming generations will think that there was no real church life during that period, and will not hear anything about the people who remained faithful to the church, about ministers, deacons and elders who fought the good fight and proclaimed Christ in the unity of word and deed.

<sup>30</sup> The same is true of the serious problems of the nations of Africa today.

congregations, elders, deacon and ministers in the church in Hungary between 1948-1989. Many of us can bear witness to the fact that we were happy in our ministry in spite of all difficulties and humiliations. We felt we were in our right place with a mission both in the country and in ecumenical relations.<sup>31</sup> We did experience the truth of Romans 1:16. The Gospel of Christ proved to be a power for many.

5. The changes of 1989 made possible greater freedom of speech. The new situation has brought about new temptations.

a) One of these is extreme nationalism. It is to be welcomed that the sense of national identity formerly suppressed could be strengthened. However, many have misused and manipulated that natural right, both outside and within the churches. In political life it has been relatively easy to swap the horse of communism for that of nationalism. The most extreme forms of this can be witnessed in Romania and Yugoslavia. The dangers and disastrous consequences of this became clear particularly in the latter case. Hatred, which is the source of that kind of thinking and behavior, can be detected in certain circles of Hungarian church and society.<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately this kind of extreme nationalism coupled with hatred has found its way into our church.

Some church leaders--particularly in the Budapest area--allied themselves with the extreme racist party MIÉP<sup>33</sup> In one church hall he expressed his view that in a critical situation – and he described the present times as critical – in making decisions a Hungarian Christian must be first a Hungarian and only second a Christian. This deeply heretical utterance created a shock all over. One hundred twenty-six ministers and elders wrote a letter of protest the content of which was published in an influential daily newspaper.

Facing all these it is to be made clear that an essential part of my national identity is the readiness to be exposed to critical examination. This should lead us to collective repentance. In the light of the Word we can get our consciousness of national identity right over against a romantic and false patriotism.

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<sup>31</sup> In 1991 the Patriarch of Moscow visited Budapest. At a reception in the presence of the head of state, the prime minister, church leaders of all denominations he thanked the Reformed Church in Hungary for initiating the Orthodox-Reformed Dialogues that meant an important line of communication with the world church. He also expressed his sorrow for the atrocities of Soviet soldiers – children of “Mother Russia” – during the war.

<sup>32</sup> For the historical background of this cf. Károly Tóth, “*Ungarischer Protestantismus 1833 – 1945 Evangelische Christen und antifaschistischer Widerstand*” *Kritisches Christentum* No. 247 April 2001, 17-23.

<sup>33</sup> The Hungarian equivalent of Le Pen’s party in France.

In these romantic views we can detect a mixture of patriotism and Christianity that amounts to syncretism. That makes self-examination a binding necessity. This cannot be done without taking our own history and context seriously. Our own history gives us shining examples of the power of the Gospel bringing nations together.<sup>34</sup> With this history it is even more deplorable that there is a growth of nationalist-racist attitudes in the Reformed Church in Hungary. We know of open or half-hidden racist remarks against Jews and Romas [Gypsies]. Some members and clergy even join the party with hidden or open racist and anti-Semitic utterances. Their voice fortified by the media has been so strong as if they were the authentic voice of the Reformed Church in Hungary. Thus it was branded, unfairly on the whole, as a racist community.

This phenomenon is not present all over the country with the same intensity. Some forces—including parts of the secular media—tend to generalize. There is a lot of generalization about our Church today. As a result some regard the Reformed Church in Hungary as in its totality accepting and promoting an intolerant, aggressive, racist attitude against other nations. This state of affairs has rendered a very serious obstacle in presenting the Gospel in our society in which immorality and hatred prevail. We have to accept our share of the responsibility for this situation.

It has to be emphasized that, in my opinion, the normal expressions of national identity are not to be disapproved of. The theological foundation of this is that the Word in her/his context addresses a person. God has called me in my Hungarian identity. I have responded to this call with a “yes” of my whole existence soul, intellect, will, and body including my “context,” which is the nation of which I am organically part. My “yes” has been expressed with the deep conviction that the Gospel of Jesus Christ gives the best hope for me individually and for my people collectively. I cannot do more for my people than to follow Christ in obedience in carrying on His mission.

However, it is part of this conviction that in Christ there is reconciliation between people separated by race, class, and events of history. It is a significant part of the mystery of Christ that all nations are together as parts of his body (Eph 3:6). All nations need the Savior, and praise him together (Rev 7:9-10). This “multinational” character is not just a result of the

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<sup>34</sup> In Southern Hungary – which is today part of Croatia – the Reformed Church has been bilingual since the Reformation: it has Croatian and Hungarian congregations – sometimes the two people in one congregation – living together in love and peace. This unity has been seriously damaged on racial grounds by Hungarians recently. It has brought much harm for both, for the cause of the Gospel as well as for the Hungarian minority there. The example was followed by some Croatian Reformed.

Gospel, but is part of it. It was the congregation at Antioch--in which people of three continents, Arabs, Jews, Greeks and Blacks lived as One Body--that demonstrated in its very life this uniting and reconciling power of Christ. This fact excludes any superiority complex. There are differences among the nations of Central and Southern Europe, for example the Romanians and the Serbs lived under the Oriental tyranny of the Ottoman Empire for almost 500 years. The devastating results of this can still be felt and seen. This is not due to their lower quality, but their historical situation.<sup>35</sup>

Unfortunately the racist tendencies continued to be present, and have been the most harmful hindrances of our mission, which is to live the life and love of Christ in our society.<sup>36</sup> In order to remedy the situation the General Synod of the Reformed Church in Hungary at its November session passed a declaration condemning racist and anti-Semitic utterances, emphasizing that they are contrary to the Gospel and therefore cannot be tolerated in the Church.<sup>37</sup>

b) The lack of thorough self-examination and that of recognizing and confessing our sins have contributed much to certain patterns of behavior, which coupled with the racism already mentioned or without this and attitudes of the party state times have remained with us. Some of these are the following:

**1. Selfishness.** The Communist system produced the most selfish type of people. It was contrary to what they proclaimed in their propaganda that they were for community (communism). The way of thinking was something like this: I am not able to influence public life, therefore I withdraw to my own home, and want to have nothing to do with others. The common good is beyond my reach, and therefore it is not my responsibility. I do not care for others. This selfishness is strongly present on our society and in the church today. My own good--financial or cultural--is the most important point to be taken into consideration in making decisions. This kind of attitude directly leads to "collective selfishness," i.e. racism.

**2. The continued acceptance of centralized decision making.** During the 40 years the church was forced by the authorities to centralize decision making. The ordinary clergy

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<sup>35</sup> The same is true of the serious problems of the nations of Africa today.

<sup>36</sup> Most of these debates remained in the Church press unrecorded. There were some exceptions. In 2000 an influential, intelligent elder of a Budapest congregation wrote an article in a church weekly calling for self-examination and renewal. An interesting and lively debate developed for a few months, but it was abruptly stopped and the issues were not brought to church courts at all.

<sup>37</sup> After the General Synod condemned the racist - anti-Semitic views in the secular press those involved have launched a serious attack against the General Synod and its presiding officers.

had no influence over events beyond the fences of the parish. They withdrew and did what they could in the congregations. There was no other way during the time of dictatorship. However, as soon as a little improvement, a wind of change was experienced, many tried to stretch the bounds of possibility.<sup>38</sup> In spite of this, in certain areas in the church these attitudes have continued. There has been not much change in terms of making and accepting decisions even up to today. In certain church bodies the *consensus fratrorum* does exist and it works. In other places nothing has changed. Actually in some areas of the church dictatorial tendencies have prevailed,<sup>39</sup> where ministers, elders and congregations serve in their enclaves and do not look outside.

This means that the attitudes of the era of the dictatorship linger on. In the party state, critique or alternative thinking was not tolerated, but was punished: prison or being pushed to the periphery of society might follow. This fear nurtured by some church leaders is still alive, as another survival of forms of behavior practiced during the era of the dictatorship.

Such an attitude not only accepts but even desires paternalism, unprincipled kowtowing to leaders, and behavior which increasingly bears the marks of the tyrant believing himself to be above the law. Such leadership--although frequently disguised under fraternal forms--then wants power without accountability. These are two aspects of the same phenomenon which are in a dynamic interrelation to one another, reinforce one another and create a vicious circle. The greater the kowtowing, the more the leader will be inclined to expand the limits of his powers and tolerate only uncritical admirers around him, bringing in decisions without the control of the community. Some react to this by withdrawal from and rejecting of responsibility for the life of the church outside the congregation. This attitude by Christians and responsible church officers is surely not acceptable in the post-Communist Era.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> In 1955, with the first sign of a thaw, ministers and elders came together and wrote a Statement of Faith. See Joseph Pungur (ed.) *An Eastern European Liberation Theology*, (Calgary AB Canada: Angelus, 1992), pp. 110 – 116.

<sup>39</sup> In June 1996 the Dean of the Faculty of Divinity in Budapest expressed his concern in his address at the Commencement Assembly. He pointed out that dictatorial tendencies in the province remained after the dictatorship imposed upon the country by the might of the Soviet Empire had been lifted. If in a community in Hungary there is a dictatorship it is accepted and taken up as it were voluntarily. For this development the responsibility lies with every Session and other church court i.e. all elders and ministers. Since 1996 in some areas the situation has worsened. Cf. “*Vom Zeitgeist überflutet*”-*Reformierte Kirchen Zeitung*, 9.1996 pp. 424-425.

<sup>40</sup> Based on Holy Scripture, the Reformation expressed the most resolute “no” to the rule of individuals or groups without the control of the community. Because of this, several of the churches of the Reformation eliminated the office of the bishop as well as any other office that confers greater power on

**3. Another characteristic of Hungarian post-communist society is to regard a person having opinions opposing one's own as an enemy.** This kind of thinking has entered our church as well. That is how the charismatic is regarded as demonic, the fundamentalist as primitive, the one engaged in ecumenical work as one preparing the way for the Anti-Christ and the liberal--and here there is no distinction between political and theological liberalism<sup>41</sup>--is the devil himself. This kind of thinking, over and above the fact that it constitutes the church aspect of hatred manifested in society, also bears witness of ignorance of the Holy Scripture and theology.

What has just been said makes it clear that there are serious tensions and divisions within the church.

**4. Another remnant of the previous regime can be seen in the church press.** The Communist press was completely silent about important and serious events of the society, or gave a distorted view of them. Their conclusion: what is not reported does not exist.<sup>42</sup> Writings and views of the enemies of the people were criticized without giving people the chance to read or respond to those views. Much of the church press follows this pattern. There are some honest church publications. Many of them, however, do not report touchy issues – as if they do not exist.<sup>43</sup> A method of doing this, well tested during the Stalinist period, was to criticize someone's views without giving anyone a chance to get to know those views.<sup>44</sup>

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a person or a small group of persons. The Reformed Church of Hungary retained the office of the bishop within the universal service of the ministerium Verbi Dei. But following the teaching of the apostles (Acts 15, Gal 2: 11), it fully subordinated the service of the bishop and of other officials to the control of the community (the Synod, the General Synod, Presbytery).

<sup>41</sup> With respect to the distinction between political and theological liberalism, see János Pásztor: *“Református teológia a XX. században”* (Reformed Theology in the Twentieth Century), in: Sándor Tenke(ed.) *Református értelmiség új utakon* [Presentations and sermons delivered at the Balatonszárszó conference of August 26-30, 1992] (Budapest: MORE, 1993), 17ff.

<sup>42</sup> On Boxing Day 1952 there was a very serious railway accident just outside the city of Szentendre where I served. The train was overcrowded. Perhaps hundreds died. There was no report about it. I myself officiated at the funeral of about ten members of the congregation who died in the accident.

<sup>43</sup> “...in certain circles of decision making the fundamental principle is to be silent about problems, particularly in public..” István Szabó, *“Az MRE elmúlt tíz évének írásos értékelései”* (Evaluation of the last 10 years of the Reformed Church in Hungary) THÉMA, 2001/1 p. 18.

<sup>44</sup> In 2001, seeing the extreme nationalistic tendencies in the church in Hungary an old, well tested friend of the church from abroad expressed his anxiety with strong criticism yet with much love and understanding. It was not published in the church press in Hungary and was dealt with only in a secular weekly.

In spite of generalizations or less than pure intentions, this criticism should be taken seriously. We have to consider the critique even if it is inimical. 2 Samuel 16:9-11 bids us to take such criticism both from inside and outside seriously.<sup>45</sup>[45]

**5. Another obstacle of renewal is the split among the various trends of piety and theology within the church.** There is one--not large, but well organized group--which is inimical towards other theologies and denominations. It is absolutely un-ecumenical, and expresses itself in a hostile attitude--apart from other trends within the Reformed Church--towards other Christian denominations. According to their publicized views the ecumenical movement prepares the way for the Antichrist. The irony of their attitude is that they deny the priority of the most fundamental and most significant witness of the Scriptures about the unity and basis of Christian faith: the confession of Christ as *Kyrios* over against their particular and fundamentally heretical views (1Cor:12:3; I John 4:2-3). These extreme views are very often coupled with extreme right wing nationalist views and practices.

From the point of view of carrying out the mission of the church--the proclamation of Christ in the unity of word and existence--this attitude of exclusion and false superiority adds to the obstacles in the way of meaningful and effective mission.

**6. Another significant trend in the church which stands in the way of renewal is the growth of forces both within the church and outside who want to return the church and state relationship to the times before 1948 which was in many ways still fully Constantinian.**<sup>46</sup> This means financial and social advantages that represent significant temptations for churches. But to yield to these forces means building upon false foundations and taking the church in the wrong direction.<sup>47</sup> We cannot base mission on state funds. It was a part of the vision of the revival that God judged the past of Hungarian church and society. Furthermore, today it has been universally accepted by World Christianity that the

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<sup>45</sup> In the Hungarian secular press one can find a wealth of material important for this self examination. Some are presented with good intentions, others not.

<sup>46</sup> Karoly Tóth, "Ungarischer Protestantismus 1933 – 1945 Evangelische Kirchen und antifaschistischer Widerstand" *Kritisches Christentum* No. 247, April 2001.

<sup>47</sup> Karl Barth's warning in 1950 are relevant even today: "Sehen Sie, Herr Bischoff, da muß ich nun auf die Länge eben doch wieder an meine erste Ungarnreise im Jahr 1936 denken, auf der ich mich nicht genug verwundern konnte, in welchem Maß die dortigen Reformierten imstande waren in der 'Stephanskronen', im Kampf gegen den Vertrag von Trianon und für das gute ungarische Recht gegen Tschechen und Rumänen, in ihrer geschichtlichen Sendung als Vorkämpfer des christlichen 'Westens' (!) ohne weiteres die *causa Dei et ecclesiae* zu erblicken. Und dann frage ich mich: Geht es denn im reformierten Ungarn gar nicht anders als jedesmal in so hundertprozentiger Konkordanz mit dem jeweils herrschenden Regime?" Karl Barth, *Offene Briefe 1945 – 1968* in Karl Barth, *Gesamtausgabe* (Zürich: TVZ Verlag).

Constantinian Era has come to a close and has brought--or is bringing about--the separation of church and state.<sup>48</sup> It has also been acknowledged that the power of the state in protecting and helping the expansion of faith has always brought about serious distortions in the very faith and practice of the church.<sup>49</sup> For that reason the church's mission must not be built on state funds.

### **What are the Main Challenges in the East?**

The above considerations may help us to sum up our reply to the question. This reply--I believe is relevant for the whole church--with particular emphasis for the churches of the post-Communist world.

a) We have to see—we, as a Church—that we are a little flock. In both Old and New Testaments, the people of God were called to stand in the world among other peoples and to be present for them (Gen 12:3; Ex 19:6; Is 49:6; Mt 10:45; John 13:12-15). The Scriptures never visualize a situation in which church and society would be identical. Where it has occurred historically, it was brought about by force.

b) Mission is to be carried out by the very existence of the Church. Its foundation is the Spirit and Word of God in the congregations. Yet it is to be the light (Mt 5:14) for society in proclaiming clearly what is the “good, pleasing and perfect will” of God (Rom 12:2) in order that anyone might come to this light. But the Church must not act as the censor of culture. In other words: Calvin's vision about the church having responsibility for every sphere of life is valid and relevant even today. However, the means are different. Our communication of God's will must not be helped by the local gendarmerie, or the power of the State.

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<sup>48</sup> A significant expression of this is: *The Statement by the Campbell Scholars* group at Columbia Theological Seminary, November 2000, to be published at Westminster/John Knox. In details cf. Douglas J. Hall, “The Future of the Church Where Are We Headed?” (Canada: United Church Publishing House, 1989); “Accounting for Hope” *Journal for Preachers* XXIV/4 Pentecost 2001. More detailed analysis of the same subject by Douglas J. Hall, *Professing the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 3 volumes. As for the Roman Church at Vatican II it acknowledged the end of the Constantinian Era. Cf. Declaratio “Dignitatis Humanae”.

<sup>49</sup> There is an immense literature dealing with the end of the Constantinian Era such as : Friedrich Gogarten, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jürgen Moltmann. In the Anglo-Saxon theology the works of Leslie Newbigin - such as *Honest Religion for Secular Man* (London: CMS, 1969); *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989), the works of Douglas J. Hall mentioned above are of great importance concerning this subject.

c) At the same time the Church is to be salt and yeast (Mt 5:13; 13:33) which permeates the whole society with powers of life and restoration. The congregation as the Body of Christ, the earthly-historical form of existence of Christ,<sup>50</sup> has the privilege and duty of bringing the living Christ--as it were--into the society: to be present for the others.<sup>51</sup> This is the mission (1Thess 1:8; Phil 2:16). In the vision of Ezekiel the living waters were bursting forth from the Temple. The presence of Christ has to be witnessed in the Church.

d) As we sit around the Eucharistic Table, we experience and proclaim the saving and uniting purpose of God in Christ for the whole creation.<sup>52</sup> It is part of our celebration to pray for the world and act in accordance with our prayers. This means that “old ways and methods” of mission must be critically tested, renewed, and used. There must be both continuity and discontinuity in our methods of mission. It must not be filled with the air of superiority, but expressing empathy and standing by people not above them.

e) In order to see our agenda of mission clearly we have to go on carefully examining our situation in the light of the Scriptures in prayerful expectation of the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

f) All these have to be carried on in all the manifold crises of the world today. The tragedy of New York City, Washington, DC, Afghanistan, Iraq, and the situation in and around Jerusalem symbolizes the depth of the crisis of humankind: hatred, wars, pollution of the environment, the growing problem of the division of world between the affluent few and the millions dying. It is an urgent demand for the Church to realize love within its communities and so to work for the healing of the world.

The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. (Romans 8:19).

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<sup>50</sup> Karl Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik* IV/1. (Zürich-Zollikon: Ev. Verlag,) 824ff.

<sup>51</sup> “Das ‘Für-andere-da-sein’ Jesu ist die Transzendenzerfahrung!... Glaube ist das Teilnehmen an diesem Sein Jesus” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand und Ergebung* (Hamburg: Siebenstern - Taschenbuch, 1971) English translation: *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

<sup>52</sup> Konrad Raiser, *Ökumene im Übergang Paradigmenwechsel in der ökumenischen Bewegung*, (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1989), 168ff.