

## **The History of the Partner Church Program**

In early 1990, Rev. Schultz, then UUA president, wrote an article in the UU WORLD about the plight of the Transylvanian Unitarians. UUA was initiating a sister church program. Ruth Stryker-Gordon had just retired from the U of MN, had time on her hands, so went to Roy Phillips saying she would investigate what might be involved in adopting a church and report back. The hope of the UUA program was to demonstrate to the Romanian government that many parts of the world would be very aware of their actions against the Unitarian Transylvanian minority. The UUA program was started with volunteers who had many problems, even in getting the names and addresses of all the churches as well as keeping track of the ministers who usually served more than one church. Because the communist regime did not allow more than one Unitarian seminarian a year, there was a shortage of ministers.

At the June 11, 1990 annual meeting of Unity Church, the congregation sent greetings to our newly assigned sister church, Homorodszentpeter in Transylvania. A committee (Olga and Tibor Zoltai, Lisa Torvik, Phyllis Gene Jones, and Ruth (the chair) and Ken Gordon) was started. We wrote the minister in Hungarian (thanks to Tibor) inquiring about what needs they might have. After no reply, we wrote again. The minister wrote back that he had been transferred to another church. Again we wrote. This time, the schoolteacher, Odin Jacob, answered. He described the village (200 with 189 Unitarians), said the church was originally built as a Catholic Church in 1526 and talked about their Hungarian roots, etc. We could not get any response about how we might help them. Odin Jacob was our faithful correspondent from then on.

Finally, one May day, we received a letter postmarked "St. Paul, MN" saying they needed a tractor and that it was a matter of "survival." Nine years later we learned (in the summer of 2001) from one of the villagers that that letter had been mailed by Judit Gellerd, a distinguished Transylvanian Unitarian who has since preached at Unity Church several times and who was very much a part of our first pilgrimage in 2001. In summary, it took two full years to get the first letter that indicated a way we might be of some assistance. The Romanian government continued to read and often confiscate mail so it was no wonder that any letter mailed from inside Romania could have only superficial information.

Because Roy Phillips did not want the committee to solicit any money through regular church channels, the committee went about it on their own. Almost \$6000 (short \$500) was ready in June. Because it was imperative for them to have the tractor before late summer and fall planting and harvesting, we asked the church to make a loan to an individual committee member. That member signed an IOU for \$500 to the church. On June 16, 1992, the \$6500 was carried to Transylvania by Don Harrington, a retired Unitarian minister from New York. He and his Transylvanian wife were available to help the villagers to purchase the tractor, a wagon, and a few other pieces of farm equipment. They brought the tractor draped in garlands of flowers to Szentpeter and they celebrated in August of 1992.

The sister church continued to have interim ministers. Aron Barabas from Abasfalva bicycled across the mountains every Sunday, even in winter, to serve our church for over a year. His sister church (Bedford, MA) invited the Barabas family (Aron, Aron Jr., wife Edit and daughter Boglarka) to come to the U.S.

While in the U.S. the Unity Church committee invited the four of them to come to St. Paul for four days - they stayed with the Zoltais and Aron preached on Sunday with Roy reading Tibor's translation of the text. This was the committee members' first experience of how moving we find these brave people. The Barabas family has pictures and the tape of the Unity Church service, which they still review periodically. That was the spring of 1994 or 1995 - unable to find those records.

The first person from our congregation to visit Szent Peter was Phyllis Gene Jones who stayed two days while she was on a trip tracing her family roots. She stayed with the family of the Gondnok (the Board Chair) and brought back pictures of the village.

Finally in 1997, Szentpeter was assigned a permanent minister, a young woman who was one of the first woman ministers in Transylvania. Kinga-Reka Zsigmond spoke and wrote English quite well so communication was easier for the first time. That year, Olga Zoltai and her brother visited Szentpeter for three days while on a visit to their homeland, Hungary.

After their visit, the committee sent money for a tile stove to heat the parsonage and started sending money for young people to attend high school. Because the village has so few children, high schoolers must go elsewhere for high school. The cost of room, board, and tuition is prohibitive for most families. This tuition help for high schoolers continues today (2002).

It was learned that the church needed a keyboard so the church did not have to be heated an extra time for practice sessions. The Unity Church choir raised the money for this purchase.

Because Kinga seemed to be a brilliant young woman, the committee arranged to bring her here for graduate study at United Theological Seminary in St. Paul where she was awarded a scholarship. She arrived in St. Paul in November 1997, lived with the Zoltais part of the time and with Lisa Torvik the other time. She attended school, Ken Gordon tutored her for her English Proficiency exam, and she spent time at the Unity Church office. She was disappointed that she could not participate more in church activities. She went home for the summer of 1998, but the bishop would not let her return to finish her degree that year. A year later she was allowed to go to Starr King in California to complete her graduate degree.

On three occasions, the church sold the embroidery and weaving done by the village women in the winter. The first sale money was sent to the Szentpeter church. However, it was learned that the women want to receive the money for their individual work. When Kinga was here, she was able to keep track of this, but it is something that has not been resolved. Some of the pilgrims bought items and then sold them at church. This may be the best way, albeit hard on our parishioners.

The committee had tried for several years to find one or two high school students who might be interested in visiting Szentpeter with a summer youth program. In the summer of 1999, Rentzi Ruud was planning a trip abroad and said she would be interested. The committee sponsored the part of her trip that took her to Transylvania. The trip had a profound impact on her and she returned planning to become a Unitarian minister. Whatever she finally decides, the report of her trip was very moving.

On Easter Sunday, 1999, the Unity Church congregation was invited to participate in the support of the now named Partner Church for the first time. That Sunday the entire offering went to the Partner Church fund. It was also the last time that the support of the Partner Church programs did not rest solely on committee members.

With the coming of Janne and Rob Eller-Isaacs, the Partner Church program took on new life with the first Unity Church pilgrimage to Homorodszepter. In August, 2001, 21 members (including the two ministers) of Unity Church spent 10 days living with villagers, getting to know them and achieving a love, understanding, and trust that could not have occurred any other way. In November 2001 a special church collection bought three cows for Project Harvest Hope and allowed the Partner Church Fund to again provide scholarships for high schoolers. At last the Partner Church committee has been energized with new ideas, new projects, a true sense of purpose and plans for a 2002 pilgrimage.

-Ruth Stryker-Gordon, February 1, 2002.