THE UU PARTNER CHURCH MOVEMENT

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RICHARD M. FEWKES

CHALICE LIGHTING FOR A PARTNER CHURCH SERVICE

What is this chalice, but a reminder of the passion of faith and freedom that burns in our hearts.

WHAT IS THIS CHALICE, BUT A REMINDER OF THE WORDS OF FRANCIS DAVID, THAT WE NEED NOT THINK ALIKE TO LOVE ALIKE.

What is this chalice, but a reminder to us that truth liberates, and love celebrates.

WHAT IS THIS CHALICE, BUT THE ILLUMINATION OF LEGEND'S STARPATH, THE ANCIENT HOPE, WHICH IS CSABA, PRINCE OF LIGHT.

What is this chalice, but a symbol of the burning kiss of God, a symbol of the Spirit of Life, which blesses us with roots and wings.

MAY THE LIGHT OF TRUTH ILLUMINE OUR MINDS, MAY THE SPARK OF LOVE SET OUR HEARTS ON FIRE, MAY THE FLAME OF FREEDOM BURN BRIGHTLY WITHIN US, NOW AND ALWAYS.

A few days after the September 11 tragedy in New York City, Washington, D.C. and Pennsylvania, the Bishop of the Unitarian Church in Transylvania, sent a letter to the UUA and the UU Partner Church Council, in which he said the following:

> Dear Unitarian Universalist Sisters and Brothers in the United States of America,
>
> Time has come that it is we, ministers and members of the Unitarian Church in Transylvania, who address to you words of compassion and support now that destructive terrorist forces have hit the democratic society of the United States. We never thought that we would have to live up this day. During the almost 200 years of our relationship and cooperation, it was always you, citizens of the free and safe America, that intervened for us when nationalist or communist forces attempted to destroy the very existence of our Unitarian communities.
>
> Today, it is with shock and sympathy that we are taking part in your losses, especially the lives of thousands of innocent people. It is also embittering to see how a country, built by the ideals of freedom and justice, is suffering for speaking up for these ideals all over the Earth….
>
> We…believe that it is our duty as witnesses of this horrifying crime to make sure that neither the United States, nor any other democratic society in the world would ever have to live through events like these again. Our prayers and thoughts are with you in these hard days of trial. May God bless America and humankind with a safer future.

He signed his letter, "In our shared faith, the Rev. Dr. Arpád Szabó, Bishop of the Unitarian Church in Transylvania." Anyone who has made the journey to Transylvania knows in new and deeper ways that we do indeed share a common faith. The

Transylvanian connection may be spiritual or historic or both, but it is a very real connection nonetheless.

One of the things I enjoyed about reading David Keyes account of the partner church movement in his book, *Most Like An Arch*, was his uncovering of the likely cross fertilization of the Unitarian movements in Transylvania, England and America. For too long we have assumed that our New England brand of Unitarianism had an autonomous and indigenous origin on our own soil, an origin that was independent of any significant influence from Transylvanian and European sources. David Keyes argues that we need to get over the "historical amnesia that plagues" our American Unitarian memories and realize instead that ours is "not so much an independent religious movement" as it is "an American expression of impulses and doctrines honed and shaped in 16th century Poland and Transylvania."

Keyes cites an 1820 letter published in England and America that gave a "lucid and comprehensive account of the history, teachings and origins of the Transylvanian churches", a letter that heavily influenced British Unitarian thought and was certainly known and read here in the States. The Transylvanian Unitarian Bishop, Kriza, who later translated Channing's writings into Hungarian, may have been the source of the information in that 1820 letter. Moreover, Convers Francis Scholia, who taught Channing and other liberal Christians, was reading and no doubt teaching from 16th and 17th century Transylvanian Unitarian texts in the Harvard library. Keyes asks, "Did Channing and his contemporaries read [Francis] David and Biandrata, and Enyedi?" and answers, "Well, yes, apparently they did."

The point is that the currents of influence flowing between Unitarianism here and abroad were not all one way but both ways. New England Unitarianism was not only an "afterglow of the Enlightenment" as Sidney Mead argued, but also "an afterglow of the Radical Reformation" with roots reaching all the way back not only to Socinius, but also to Francis David. Early British and American Unitarians were often derided as "Socinians" (a charge that Channing and others tried to imply was not so). But as Keyes notes, "they might just as easily have been called 'Davidians'."

It is a fact that Socinius and David were contemporaries who knew each other well, who visited and wrote and argued fine points of Unitarian doctrine with one another. They were not in fact that different in their thoughts and views. Their theological doctrines were not confined to Poland and the Carpathian mountains of Transylvania, but over the centuries spread to other parts of Europe, including England, and eventually America. It is also interesting to note, as reported by Imre Gellerd, that Transylvanian teachers and ministers over the centuries were equally influenced by the Enlightenment—they had their own "afterglow"—and then returned to their Biblical and Davidian roots.

All of this is to underline Bishop Szabó's closing reference to "our shared faith", and to emphasize that the journey to Transylvania is in fact a real pilgrimage to the historical origins of our faith. To those among us who would argue that the historical connections are "too ify" to be convincing, I would answer that the spiritual connections are

nonetheless right and true all together. Nearly 80 years ago Louis C. Cornish spoke of his experience of "driving up a high plateau in the dark for [his] first view of the lights of Kolozsvar, the city that has been called 'the Unitarian Rome'." For him, like so many others since, it was a pilgrimage to the roots of his Unitarian faith. When he entered the First Unitarian Church in Kolozsvar he referred to it as "this ancient congregation, undoubtedly the oldest Unitarian Society in the world." He had come home to the place where it all began. Cornish, by the way, was by far the greatest Unitarian internationalist of his day. He traveled not only to Eastern Europe, but also to the Philippines where Unitarianism and eventually Universalism was beginning to take root.

Bishop Szabó also makes reference to the fact that during the nearly 200 years of our cooperation and relationship with one another it was always us, American Unitarians, who intervened for our Transylvanian counterparts when nationalist or communist forces attempted to destroy the very existence of Unitarian churches and communities in that region. The partner church movement began after the First World War when Transylvania was taken from Hungary and ceded to Romania because Hungary had the misfortune to be on the wrong side of that war. It happened again in W.W. II.

In 1922 a special Commission of American and British Unitarian leaders traveled together to Transylvania to strengthen ties between Unitarians there and here. The Commission was headed by Louis C. Cornish, future President of the AUA, and three associates, the Rev. Palfrey Perkins of Weston, the Rev. Harold Speight of Boston, and the Rev. Lawrence Redfern from Liverpol, England. A Sister/Adoption Church program had been established a year before between churches in the U.S. and Transylvania while the British Unitarians were focusing their concerns on the survival of former Hungarian universities and colleges in Transylvania including the theological institute in Kolozsvar.

Cornish's Commission Report reads very much like the travelogue reports in the current UU Partner Church Newsletter. At nearly every church and village they visited they were welcomed with great warmth and enthusiasm. They would celebrate worship together, someone would translate the sermon into Hungarian, children dressed in native costume would present flowers, gifts would be exchanged, embraces and heartfelt expressions of gratitude were given, etc. At one of the services, "the congregation sang the National Hungarian hymn for the first time since the Romanian occupation. Nearly everyone in the church wept." (Cornish, p. 44)

I am reminded of an ecumenical service I attended during my first visit to Cluj in 1992. The service was in honor of all clergy who were imprisoned during Communist rule in Romania. It was held in the Calvinist Reform Church. Some survived the ordeal of imprisonment and some died in prison. Twenty-eight Unitarian ministers went to prison, 8 died, 20 survived. The minister of the First Unitarian Church, Dazsó Szabó, my kind host while I was in Kolozsvar, represented the Unitarians. He died of cancer four years later. He had spent 6 years in prison and was never allowed any communication with his wife and family for the first five years. Though everyone spoke Hungarian at the service, and I understood not a word, I got the gist of the service--a homily by each religious representative followed by the reading of the names of the prisoners--those present stood

up and were acknowledged. The choir that day sang the Hungarian National Anthem, a daring thing to do in Romania, and there were many moved to tears as they sang it.

Louis Cornish made mention of the fact that the music in the Transylvanian services was “unlike any…that we are familiar with. Its range was very limited, the tempo extremely slow, and the effect somewhat suggestive of Gregorian chanting. Much of the music was in the minor key, which gave the feeling of melancholy. What the singing often laced in musical quality was made up in volume and vigor.” (p. 37)

It was amusing to read about some of the difficulties of translation experienced by the commission visitors in 1922. In the conclusion to his welcome speech, one of the Transylvanian ministers, exclaimed, “There are three great wrongs, and these are Faith, Hope and Love.” On another occasion, Palfrey Perkins tried to ask his hosts if they might provide some eggs for their hungry guests. There was no translator present. He asked “in every language known to him. Finally, he drew pictures of eggs on the bill of fare, and as a concluding indication of [their] needs, stood up flapped his arms and crowed. His efforts were received with marked appreciation. Everyone smiled and nodded. In a few minutes they brought him a raspberry ice!” (p. 25)

This reminds me of the time we took the minister and his wife from our partner church village out to dinner in a nice restaurant. This was the first time they had gone out to eat in six years. We raised our glasses and shared a Hungarian toast, which I cannot pronounce—it means, "To Your Good Health." If you leave off the accent on one of the syllables the toast means, "To Your Whole Backside", which I said on one occasion. They all laughed. I might just as well have said, “Up your ass.”

One of the things noted by Cornish in his 1922 Report was the clear difference between the relationship of church and state in Transylvania versus America. “For generations the State has supported the churches, and the churches have supported the schools. There is not even a rudimentary comprehension of what we mean by the self-support of local institutions.” (p. 41-42) This is something that UU’s today have difficulty understanding. Without state support the clergy in Transylvania could barely survive. They can barely survive as it is. When Cornish asked the congregants in one of the villages how much they raised in a year toward support of the church and ministry he was told “about 100 lei (less than a dollar).” (p. 42) Today it would take around 10,000 lei to equal that dollar.

I was struck by the human quality of the relationships established in 1922. When the commission team first called on Bishop Ferencz and his wife, the Bishop apologized and said to them, “I cannot greet you as I would, for this afternoon I bury my son.” Cornish replied, “We have come not as delegates, but as friends to mourn with you.” Later on, near the end of their visit, they returned to Kolozsvar, only to learn that the Bishop had just lost his son-in-law and was faced with yet another burial of a loved one.

In a visit to one of the village churches the commission met a 19 year-old girl and her family. They were all dressed in black. They had just lost their father and breadwinner. They learned that the young woman would have to give up her dream of completing her

Normal College education to become a teacher because the family could no longer afford it. Palfrey Perkins inquired about the cost. $35 per year, he was told. He consulted with the commission members and then told her that they would see to it that she received the needed funds for the ensuing year. She burst into tears and kissed Perkins hand, so moved was she by this gesture of generosity and support. Later on in their journey a similar offer was made to a young man needing $24 for board at the Divinity school.

Scholarship programs for young people in Transylvania have become a part of the partner church program in many UU churches today. I myself have had a similar experience in helping to support a young woman complete her education at a business school. I have witnessed the same tears of joy and gratitude in two previous visits with her and her family. That alone made my visit worth the effort.

Cornish noted some of the difficulties endured by the Hungarians following the First World War. The Romanian army occupation of Transylvania in 1919-20 led to physical abuse of the population, imprisonment without trial, the seizure of university buildings and properties which had been owned and founded by Unitarians, organ pipes removed from the churches were taken to be melted into bullets for the military, Romanian teachers replaced Hungarian educators and the use of the Hungarian language in Romanian schools was to be forbidden. These actions were in violation of the Treaty of Trianon, which was supposed to safeguard minority rights in Transylvania.

In his Report, Cornish said that the "Transylvanian schools, colleges, and churches" were "never in greater peril than at the present moment." (Cornish, p.6) "All that has kept the great majority of our Transylvanian churches alive is the American support, as all that has kept the schools and college alive is the British support." (p. 46) Cornish was undaunted in his appeal: "We beg for the continued support during the period of readjustment of the sister churches…upon which [their] very existence in Transylvania depends."(p. 14) Well, that support endured for nearly a decade. During that period some 112 American Unitarian churches adopted a like number of Transylvanian churches, a relationship that, as noted in the AUA directory for 1929-30, gave "not only material help, but moral encouragement, which is out of all proportion to the financial aid received." So it was then, and so it has continued to this day. Only now we can truly say that the moral and spiritual encouragement is a two-way relationship, with inspiration, change and transformation moving us as much as them.

The sister church adoption program begun by Cornish might well have continued uninterrupted to the present day but for two events—the stock market crash in October 1929 and the eruption of W.W.II in the late 1930's. As noted by Leon Hopper in his 1998 paper on the Mission And History of the Partner Church Council, following the stock market crash, the sources of funding from American partners pretty much disappeared and the adoption project languished, while with the horrors of W.W.II the connections between churches were effectively "erased from memory"—the only exceptions being Kings Chapel and First Unitarian Church in Berkeley, which sustained their connections from the 1920's to today.

The current Partner Church program grew out of a trip to Romania in 1990 by then Moderator and President of the UUA, Natalie Gulbrandsen and Bill Schulz. They wanted to do something to help the Unitarian churches there, all of which had suffered under the oppressive regime of Ceausescu. They asked then Bishop Lajos Kovacs what the UUA could do to help and his quick response was "reinitiate sister church relationships." (Hopper, p. 5) Bill Schulz then followed up the request with a letter in the U.U. WORLD inviting those who might be interested to respond accordingly. Nine churches immediately signed up. By March 1991 some 161 Transylvanian churches were matched with the same number of U.S. and Canadian churches. The program was off and running. The common thread between beginnings of the partner church programs in 1921 and 1990 was that they were both founded "in response to an immediate political and economic crises in Transylvania" (Hopper, p. 5)

Judit "Zizi" Gellerd, daughter of the late Transylvanian Unitarian minister and scholar, Imre Gellerd, seized the challenge of the current crisis to promote her "Save Transylvanian Unitarianism" program with great vigor and passion. She became the lightning rod that energized and gave momentum to something that no one could have predicted would happen. The response on the part of UUA churches and individuals was overwhelming. By 1993 the UUA administration realized it "could not be responsible for sustaining the partner church program." (Hopper, p. 6) Up to that point the program was being coordinated by Natalie Gulbrandsen with the help of Polly and Ted Guild who worked as volunteers to manage the office, respond to inquiries, and publish the first newsletter called "Bridges."

The volume of work involved was more than the UUA (which had no budget) with volunteer staff could handle. The end result of was the formation of the UU Partner Church Council at the 1993 UUA General Assembly in Charlotte, NC, with C. Leon Hopper as its first President and Judit Gellerd as the General Secretary. I had the honor of serving as the first Vice President of the Council. Since its inception the UUPCC has grown in numbers and complexity with volunteer net workers assigned to every UUA District in the U.S. and Canada, and the expansion of partner church relationships to include not only Romania, Hungary and the Czech Republic, but also the Khasi Hills in India and Universalist churches in the Philippines. Poland, Russia and even Pakistan have some indigenous UU churches and fellowships that may someday be linked to the Partner Church program. Recently the PCC hired its first employee, Cathy Cordes, to be its Executive Director, to assist in the administration of a program that needs far more attention than volunteers alone can do to keep it going.

It is interesting to note some of the changes that have taken place in Transylvania since the re-initiation of the partner church program. The Bishop used to be elected for life like the Pope. But since the deaths of Bishops Kovacs and Erdos in the last decade the Transylvanian Unitarians have crafted a new church constitution which sets limits to the number of years a Bishop can serve, (two six year terms) and an age limit of 75. They have become more democratized, no doubt influenced by the UUA election model.

It should also be noted that under the old Ceausescu regime Unitarians were limited to 2 theological students per year. Opportunities to study or to publish books were severely limited and almost entirely eliminated. Since the revolution in 1989 there have been well over 50 students, one-third or more of whom are women. These are the first women to be admitted to the theological school in 50 years! They are now being placed as ministers in rural churches, which is no insult, since Unitarianism in Transylvania is largely a rural village phenomenon. 95% of the churches are in the village countryside.

Though Unitarianism in Transylvania is more traditionally Unitarian Christian in orientation than in America it is still the most liberal religious option available to Hungarians (or Romanians) living in that part of the world. In the rural churches the men sit on one side of the church, the women on the other. The urban churches are more progressive about where people may sit.

The key to the success of the UU Partner Church program is the relationship between congregations here and abroad. The relationship often begins with correspondence between the ministers followed by visits, with lay involvement growing as the relationship develops. Money, of course, is part of the helping relationship between the churches, but far more important than money are the personal relationships established between laity and clergy in the congregations. North American visitors find themselves deeply affected and transformed by their encounter with the women, men and children in their partner churches. Some churches have been able to bring the minister and spouse from Transylvania to the U.S or Canada, which helps make for an even stronger bond of friendship, and other churches have organized trips for high school youth to visit young people in Transylvania. I can tell you this. Making the personal connection changes both hearts and minds—ours as well as theirs.

My former church in Norwell, Mass. has a partner church relationship with a small village congregation in Kadacs, Romania, about 200 members. I had the pleasure of visiting there on four different occasions from 1992 to the year 2000. I went alone the first time. Each successive visit more and more lay members came with me. These visits helped to cement ties between our two congregations. We have exchanged gifts and letters with one another and pen pal relationships have been established with some of the women in our two churches and also between the children. On one of our later visits we were greeted with hugs and kisses and tears. The minister from Kadacs, József Biro, who is a very emotional person, told us that they had awaited our arrival like the coming of the messiah.

During my first visit to Kadacs we presented a gift of one of our antique silver communion chalices, properly engraved, in Hungarian, a gift from our church to their church. The tears flowed down the cheeks of their minister, József Biro, as I made the presentation. It was a moving moment. Then followed their presentation of gifts to me and our congregation of a hand embroidered table cloth from the minister's wife, and a miniature carved gate with an inscription in Hungarian which means, "You can be at home anywhere, but you only have one homeland." In 1998 my colleague, Judy Campbell and I, were invited to participate in a Christening for two of the children. It

was a beautiful ceremony and the parents were so appreciative of the fact that their American visitors helped to bless their children. What made it even more significant was that we used the Norwell silver chalice to pour the water for the Christening.

During the ten years of our partner church relationship we have provided modest financial aid to the congregation and minister's family, which has been enormously helpful to them. With a $1,000 gift in 1992 they were able to do some long overdue painting and repairs of the church and schoolroom, roof repairs on the meetinghouse, to dig a new well for drinking water for the minister and his family, and install an indoor toilet in the minister's parsonage. The old toilet was an old fashioned outhouse that sometimes was occupied by one of their chickens, which was great fun when you had to make a trek to the privy in the middle of the night. I know because it happened to me!

On one occasion, the afternoon I was leaving, I opened the outhouse door, only to be greeted by a squawking chicken. How it got in there I do not know, but it had made a mess of the place. As it squawked and flew by me out of the door it graced my pant leg with a little bit of manure, something to remember her by. It is certainly an experience I shall never forget. Afterwards, the minister's wife got down on her hands and knees frantically trying to clean my pants, which I was still wearing, with her version of borax. The absurdity of it all hit us and we started laughing. Later, when I had returned to Segesvar, the minister there told my partner church minister that when they finally installed a new toilet in the parsonage they would have to be sure to put in a special shelf for the chicken.

During previous trips I was able to visit numerous churches and to meet many of their ministers and church leaders. I love the names of the towns and villages and cities we saw. We visited churches and ministers in:

*Nagyyajta (Large Door) and its Unitarian Fortress Church with its inside ceiling like the hull of a ship (much like Old Ship Church in Hingham),

*Almasfalva (Apple Village) with its remnants of Roman and Gothic periods...

*St. Martin Unitarian Church and its new Youth Conference Center (their new young minister, Bela Krisbai, and his lovely wife, were very gracious, and spoke excellent English)—their partner church in San Jose had burned to the ground and they sent *them* a $100 gift...

*Udvaherdley, a predominantly Hungarian city, which had two churches, one old and one brand new...

*Torda, the place where Francis David bested his Catholic, Lutheran and Calvinist counterparts in a debate before King John Sigismund who responded with an Edict of Religious Tolerance that has stood the test of centuries...

*Cluj /Kolozsvar where the Unitarian Church headquarters and theological school are located and also the rock in the foyer of the First Unitarian Church that David stood upon when he converted the populace of the city to the Unitarian faith…or

*Deva where Francis David languished and died in the prison fortress high up on a hill for a free faith that we all hold dear.

Whoever goes on a journey to Transylvania starts out as a tourist exploring another region and culture and ends up a pilgrim returning to the historical and spiritual roots of his or her liberal religious faith and the realization that Unitarian Universalism is in fact a global faith with many local expressions around the world. By having a larger vision of who and what we are, we deepen and extend our sense of purpose and our reach as a church and denomination. It is important, I believe, for North American UUs to make the Transylvania connection or Unitarian heritage and then to expand that connection to include the expressions of our free faith in other church traditions that are truly global in scope. As I told the congregation in Kolozsvár back in 1992, "You have a proud history of faith and courage dating back for and a quarter centuries. We have much to learn from you in terms of your example of a long and enduring faith born out of struggle and martyrdom over many generations."

Indeed we do. Perhaps we can learn from them as we seek to come to terms with the events of September 11, 2001 in our congregations and churches. As we do so, the pastoral words of Bishop
and months ahead: "Our prayers and thoughts are with you in these hard days of trial. May God bless America and humankind with a safer future."

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