

“On the Cutting Edge of Mission”

Rev. Daniel Szabo – Hungary

June 8, 1996

Greetings

It is a great honour and privilege for me to be here and bring greetings from a world far away, to where your precious invitation arrived. Some of you kindly took on the responsibility of suggesting my name for this great award. And there were also those who from this distance arranged the details of this trip, even my air ticket, and who trusted that I would reply even when that reply was slow in arriving. For all this I wish to give thanks to the Lord and to the Canadian Presbyterian Church, and especially to the curatorium of the E.H. Johnson Memorial Trust Fund, to all those who proposed me for this award.

1. Who is receiving this award?

I have to confess that I mediated for a long time and wondered if this invitation were not a mistake. In my world I am familiar with authorities at the highest levels making mistakes – by such tragic errors, thousands and thousands were imprisoned over the past decades. I supposed that in Canada you make mistakes also, though in the other direction – for example, sharing this award with me.

However, I would like to consider this award as one not addressed only to me, but through me to the Hungarian Reformed Church and to suffering Christians. It is intended for the Hungarian nation, which for more than a thousand years – or to be more precise, exactly 1,100 years this year – has lived in the Carpathian Basin in Eastern Europe, on the cutting edge between the Latin-European culture and the Byzantine-Slavic culture. Allow me to use this expression cutting edge for the historical and cultural frontiers. We have got a lot in our history to share with others – since we participated in the Italian Renaissance, in the German and Helvetic Reformation, and in the French Enlightenment, and since English Puritanism, and German Pietism have also affected us. The Hungarian nation was on front line edge, when in the first centuries of our presence in Eastern Europe, we suffered the attacks of the Asiatic Tartars. Later, in the 15th century, when the imperialistic Turkish-Muslim Empire invaded Europe, we defended the West European Christian world. If you travel in Europe, and at midday you hear the ringing of church bells, please remember that this is in memory of the Hungarian heroes and for the joy of escape.

The nation was on the frontier in 1526, when finally we had been conquered by the Ottoman-Turkish Empire, and Hungary was separated into three parts for 150 years. Then, after the Turks were expelled in the 18th and 19th centuries, we fought against the Austrian-Hapsburg Empire. Later we have been under the German, and finally the Russian, occupation. During the 20th century, we have lost two-thirds of the country, along with 5 million Hungarian citizens. I wanted to tell you all this in a spirit of penitence and hope as we ourselves have missed the right way many times.

The same is true for the Hungarian Reformed Church. It pleased the Lord to sow the seed of the Reformation in the gap, into a territory located between the Western Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox worlds, between the Austrian-European and Turkish-Balkan spheres. Not to mention that by the Lord's wisdom, He protected the weak plant of the Hungarian Reformation from the Austrian-Catholic world through the umbrella of the Turkish occupation. The Counter-Reformation was very cruel in Hungary. Our ministers suffered in the Austrian prisons and were galley slaves, and many churches were closed or destroyed. All this explains why the Hungarian Reformed Church participated in, and identified herself with the two big freedom fights of the nation against Austrian Roman Catholic power.

Our Hungarian Reformed Church, which had always been one unit since the time of the Reformation and had never split into different branches, suffered an especially difficult situation when, after the First

World War, it found itself in six countries (which today now comprise eight countries). In the present-day Romania we have 1000 Reformed congregations; in Sub-Carpathian Ukraine, 96; in Slovakia, 80; in the countries of Former Yugoslavia, 50; and even in Austria there are some. In the previous 40 years, in Hungary alone, we have lost 1200 schools and indeed all our buildings and possessions, with the exception of the church buildings and manses themselves. You can imagine what happened outside of the country. It is only the Lord's grace that we survived at all.

Also on the cutting edge were those pastors and congregational members who were deported to Siberia, whose churches were turned into atheistic museums, cinemas or taverns. Today, their martyrs names may be read on the memorial plaques all over the villages of Sub-Carpathian Ukraine.

The situation is difficult even today. South from us, the war in Yugoslavia has seen murder between nationalities who could understand each other's language very well, but who had the heritage of blood-feuds. To the east in parts of the Former Soviet Union there is a dangerous Mafia world, and in the north the new nation of Slovakia seeks her own way, just after a divorce from her sister-nation of the Czech Republic.

In spite of all this, the Lord waits from us Hungarians a few very important attitudes: to look back on the road of 1100 years with penitence and humble-heartedness confessing our own sins and mistakes too; to walk in love and to seek peace and healing through the Good News of the Gospel in our own hearts and in the hearts of the surrounding nations. Our position in Europe is not given to us to be a gap, to separate – but instead for building a channel and a bridge. But more of this a little later.

2. Canadian – Hungarian Connections

If I could clarify who are the real people addressed by this invitation, then I also have to mention the way in which the invitation came to be delivered. I am really sorry that I did not know E.H. Johnson, though I wanted to read everything that I could of his person and work. But this personal unawareness doesn't mean that we could not be in close connection with one another. I did not know Abraham, or King David, nor the Prophets, yet in a miraculous way such people, who are so far away from us, can influence our lives in a deeper way than the thousands who surround us.

What's more, I have known many Canadian Presbyterian leaders who visited us in the spirit of E.H. Johnson. So I knew the moderator, The Right Rev. Davidson, who came to us at the time when the Iron Curtain still existed and who wanted to build a bridge and connections. Rev. Davidson, after the official meetings, took the risk to visit hidden places, to meet with me and to get some more information about the suffering people, about the Christians, and about the Lord's work in the surrounding area. At that time I was a defrocked pastor, and worked as a receptionist in a hotel. Later in 1991, at the beginning of the changes in the Soviet Union, two excellent churchmen arrived, the Right Rev. Dr. Allan, the Moderator of the General Assembly of that year and Rev. John Congram, whom I don't have to introduce to you, the chief editor of The Presbyterian Record. I had the privilege to guide them in Hungary and in the Former Soviet Union, the present Ukraine. That was the first time that Canadian Presbyterians officially came to this part of the world. Ignoring their tiredness and even the dangers, they visited our churches and even preached in our Reformed Congregations. They really formed an historical church connection, and all those who know the situation there and the primitive travelling conditions and accommodations can imagine their commitment.

There is also another very special connection between my nation and yours. I believe that now is the ideal opportunity to express our thanks again, on behalf of the Hungarian Reformed Church, for all the love and help that you shared for the thousands and thousands of Hungarian refugees who arrived in Canada especially after the 1956 Hungarian Revolution against the Soviets. You welcomed and helped them to

form Hungarian Presbyterian Churches, and you supported them, and continue to support them until today. This meant, and means, their physical existence in your respectable organization. So many of our people have never moved so far, and at the same time have never been welcomed in such a lovely way, as it happened in Canada (in our minds Canada is even further away than the United States). Naturally I know that there were many official international, ecumenical conferences where our churches met. But here I wanted to emphasize the most personal and historical points. Now many times we enjoy seeing the second and third generation Hungarians, members of your congregations, who have grown up under your caring, returning as missionary workers to Hungary.

3. The Mission

So far I have tried to show the waves of the ocean in a shell, to give some information in only a few minutes of Hungary's history and the church situation, so you might sense the context in which we dwell. I know it's simply impossible – not to mention the fact that we Hungarians may understand our past and present only in the light of God's plan and His world mission. His missionary concept explains us in the seemingly chaotic running of our history the meaning of our struggles, suffering, and achievements. He is in charge and He acts, overruling even the most evil and demonic plans, correcting, warning, completing and finishing His plan. He is the Lord of the harvest and also of the sowing of the seed. We may be only workers by grace, but He is the Lord. It is the most exciting experience to consider how His covenant, patience, grace, glory and His saving love characterize and motivate His mighty power interfering in and forming history and bringing about social changes.

The great experience and understanding of this century, and even of the whole world events, is that the historical changes are moved and forced sometimes by only one Bible verse. And one verse, one revelation, is enough to cause an empire to collapse. It's enough to neglect and to destroy only one word of the Revelation concerning the glory of God, and to try instead to build up our own glory. If so, then the governments, the nations, the political parties, the armies, and the economic sources will come into conflict with the word of Isaiah: I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols. (Isaiah 42:8)

From my childhood I have seen three empires to rise like beasts from the ocean and then to collapse. All of these three wanted to destroy the glory of God. And the smaller nations around them, under their influence or oppression, did the same. History teaches us to take seriously the Word of God. We all, together with the churches, have to realize that in the Bible and in His revelation, we do not have materials for a theology of luxury, for extreme ideas and for reckless, foolhardy higher criticism – none whatsoever. His mighty power appears in His Word. God, at the end of the 20th Century, takes His Word as seriously as He took it when He said at the time of Creation, Let there be light. Or at the dawn of our salvation, when Jesus cried out: It is finished. And concerning the future: Behold, I am coming soon. During this century, every large European nation collapsed and suffered, together with its people, because they neglected and rejected the Word of God. May the Lord save Canada from this mistake.

The other mighty motivating power of the Lord in history is His saving and caring love, His missionary plan. This gospel should be preached all over the world. If the empires, cultures, philosophies and ideologies erect a wall to hinder the preaching of the gospel, then they are sentenced to fall down and disappear. We have some special experiences in this regard. All those who travelled in the former Soviet Union in the difficult period, all those who wept for our prisoners in Siberia, and who visited our relatives there, have some impression of the power. We have seen how our relatives, as we secretly visited them, covered the windows with black paper, so that we would not be seen from the outside. Or as when we crossed the border, we suffered the body-search for any New Testaments, when the question was always "Do you have weapons, drugs or Bibles?" Indirectly the empire itself proved the mighty effect of this 3-4,000 year old book, as they sensed the so-called danger of this book against the ungodly empire. We had some experience of how this empire worked. And then we witnessed the change from one day to another.

As you sense the thaw in the spring, or even more so an earthquake under a huge building. As we travelled, we felt ourselves in Babylon, in the time of Ezekiel and Daniel, in the time of decline. The power of the Spirit of the Lord began to shake the empire. And the picture was so real that at every square of Moscow, I supposed that I would meet the prophets. Then the Golden Head rolled down, because the clay feet were broken by a stone which had fallen down without the touching of a human hand. One could sense on the faces of the controlling, border guards, of the military people, in previously perfectly-closed military towns, and in the eyes of the children, that a political and social earthquake has begun. But about the stone it is also written that it should grow up and fill all the earth. It is a picture of the growing of the Kingdom of God. And that's the other aspect of this ideological and economic collapse – the growing of the Kingdom of God.

A few weeks ago I visited Moscow and the former Leningrad. At both places you could find a strong search for the Reformed understanding of the Bible. You could find a Presbyterian-Reformed-Calvinistic appearance. Calvin's Institutes are being translated chapter by chapter. The Helvetic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism are being distributed in Ukrainian and Russian. They are opening schools, and they are educating missionary workers with a large varieties of courses. In the present St. Petersburg, the center of this development is the institution called Open Christianity, and in Moscow it is the Reformed Center, along with the endeavours to establish a Christian University. Many groups, including New Life (the Russian Campus Crusade), Russian Christian Radio, Child Evangelism Fellowship and Deyneka Russian Ministries (Association for Spiritual Renewal) are joined together for the sharing of the Reformed understanding of the Word of God. How is it received – is it welcomed or refused? We have to know that two years after the great changes, at the large conference in Riga, Latvia, we were informed of more than 1,000 missionary associations, with their telephones and fax numbers, which had already invaded in the positive sense the former Soviet Union. We have to understand that the Orthodox brethren, which became the biggest martyr church in the 20th Century during the Stalinist times, now defends itself against, and even attacks, the Protestant Presbyterian-Reformed missionary activities. Partly they themselves have to confront a Reformed movement inside of their own church, not to mention the missionary affect from outside. In their thousand year long church history, it was entirely new that the Russian Orthodox Church in these years distributed millions and millions of copies of the Bible among their members. Most of the time they were sowing the good seed into very good soil. We may observe a very special process – as the Russian Orthodox Church wishes to defend itself against the effect of the missionary activity, they themselves are participating in the same activities; and what they never have done earlier, now they do – they open Sunday Schools, High Schools, and even universities. The power of the gospel, like the roots of the tree, is pushing the liturgical frames. The Reformation is crossing the solid Eastern border of the last 500 years. But it arrives not only from Europe, but also from Asia, from Korea, and also from the Canadian-American world.

The Lord who with one mighty arm destroyed the atheistic empire, now with His other arm calls, searches for and saves the nations under the ruins of their own Babel, and I am convinced He has a wonderful plan for the renewal of the Russian-Orthodox church. We have to love them, understand them, and we have to help them to understand the Lord's plan in this renewal.

You experience the same changing in the Romanian world, where there is a tremendous growth of neo-Protestant groups. Our 1,000 Reformed congregations, as minority nationality, have to pray for open doors for the sharing of the Gospel. I myself, together with my friends living in Romania, distributed more Romanian Bibles than Hungarian ones. Before my Moscow trip I lunched together with the Albanian ambassador. Presently in Albania there are 80 Protestant congregations, all born very recently, together with the renewed Catholic and Orthodox churches. All their works are done under tremendous Muslim pressure. The next big evangelical conference with a strong Reformed character will be in the Albanian capital Tirana. Albania was the most committed atheistic anti-Christian country, overplaying its role to the level of widespread murder. Yet from Tirana today you may listen to a 24-hour-a-day Christian

radio broadcast in many languages. As I stood at the former Communist Heroes Square in Tirana, how I felt the Lord's power to destroy and His love to save. I am afraid there is no time for the following: how exciting it would be to give some information about the Mongolian Christian churches. These were raised partly by Mongolian students who studied in Moscow and Budapest under the great plan of the Communists for world student education. Instead, in Moscow and Budapest they heard Christian testimonies, mostly from African students who came from revolutionary worlds but who have a living Christian tradition. Many students who became secret Christians moved home as missionaries in their own country. And the Gypsies. In Romania 4 million, in Hungary, half a million. First time in the history you could find Gypsy congregations. I have many god-children from Gypsy families, and I often share their daily life. Not an easy nationality, but how beautiful people they are as they accept the Word of God. Just as a curiosity, I mention that recently the first Chinese Protestant congregation was formed in Hungary. They are Chinese who come mostly from Hong Kong.

4. How can we participate in God's Work?

How could a wounded nation or the entire Eastern Europe, or members of different communities, start to be healed and to share the Gospel? The Lord has very special advice concerning this healing. We should do what He has done with us: we have to forgive, and we have to ask for forgiveness. This is the way of healing. Would we act in another way if we arrived in Chechnya, or to the Yugoslav situation – hate for hate, revenge for revenge? By this way we would be unsuitable for the work of the Kingdom of God. This is a very special time – the Lord addresses not only the churches, but also the nations. The nations as such – were always, and are always, in the Lord's mind. We must realize that there are communities who are more responsive for the Lord's call at a certain time – and there are those who are delaying their response. We read about this attitude of the people from this aspect of the Gospel of Matthew 11:12: From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. We may listen also to the very frightening statements of the Lord, if we were not responsive – Matthew 21:43: Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.

In our responsibility for our own nation, and in our commitments for the historical path of our Church, we have to keep our thinking inside of the concept of the Kingdom of God. The Lord didn't die only for us, but also for our potential, or real enemies. We are who we are only by grace, and God speaks Romanian, Serbian, and Russian too. Naturally you may believe that if you have some experiences of people's wickedness, and you are bitter because your relatives suffered in Siberia, then it is not so easy to accept. But the Lord is mighty to give you supernatural love for supernatural tasks. And if you accept this special gift, then you would receive brethren and friends from the other side of the frontier line, and you may look into the Lord's work in another nation's life. The horizon broadens, and at the same time you feel more and more love for your own nation.

So we formed a Scottish-Irish-English-Hungarian missionary society, and later a Ukrainian-Russian-Hungarian one. Later we travelled together to the Urals, to the Black Sea, and to the Arctic Ocean. Our confession says that we should have a good hope for everybody and everything. Don't be afraid of the condition and situation in which you should do missionary work. There are human endeavours which need optimal conditions: but the power of the Gospel is mighty enough to act amongst the chaos, and the chaos may also be an opportunity for the growing of the Kingdom of God. We are surrounded by clouds of witnesses in this regard.

All together what is it that we can do, and should do? What does the Lord expect from us? Is there anything we can do, humanly speaking? The preaching of the Gospel, and the teaching of the nation, have the same roots. The Christian school and Christian education is not a human idea only. I mentioned that we as the Hungarian Reformed Church had most of our schools nationalized in the last 40 years. Indeed

we were left with only one. Yet by God's grace we have been able to open or re-open over the past 5 years 85 institutions in Hungary, from kindergarten to university, and in the whole Carpathian basin, more than 100. In most cases we have received back from the state only the empty building; we are struggling but we survive. Our oldest school celebrates its 465th year this year. We re-opened a theological academy which was closed by force over 40 years ago. After five years, we have now arrived to the graduation of the first students from this re-opened institution. Amongst very hard circumstances, we opened Christian schools in the present Romania, Ukraine and also Slovakia. I am sure if you would see the buildings, it would be difficult for you to believe we could function in those circumstances: but the Lord helps us. We would like to educate workers who have some vision concerning the Lord's plan, the nations, the languages, the cultures, the denominations, and who know how the Lord crosses the borders to heal by His love. We need a new generation which would not fear to move on the cutting edge.

The world became small. No matter where we live we might meet the missionary field. In Sarospatak and in Moscow I worked together with a Canadian Christian professor. Missionary fields exist all around us which also mean caring, teaching, supporting activities for the spreading of the Christian witness. Why not try to hold more strongly each other's hand and to work together for His kingdom, to walk side by side following His footsteps?

Thank you once again that your invitation addressed to them and to me, strengthened me in this endeavour, and I wish and pray the Lord's blessing upon all of our lives in His service.