

E. H. Johnson Award
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Although universal in their nature and relentlessness, the progress of history and of time, are neither perceived nor experienced in a universal way. Similarly, for some, the world has long been a global village while for others, the world has never extended beyond their native village. How greatly time and geography can shape our experience, our thinking, our fate and our life. When I say this in Canada, it sounds humdrum; when I say this in Eastern Europe it can cause a pulse to quicken, eyes to shine or a heart to mourn. Being in the year 2001, behind us, in enumerated units of time, is a century which has separated us into different worlds. The big players of this past century were the first and second worlds, both of which, in pushing God aside, embraced the marriage of science and technology which, as man's new idol, had seemingly provided humanity the power to control the forces of nature. The two big stories of such progress which evolved and were dominant through most of the 20th century were the communist meta-narrative (as post-modern authors refer to it) which gripped the former Soviet Union along with its Eastern European satellite-states and the capitalist, liberal meta-narrative of Western Europe and North America. Both were committed to making progress towards a free, just and materially prosperous society; it was only in their choice of political and economic order that they differed. At the end of the 20th century, with the collapse of the communist system, it has become clear that this particular story was not able to fulfill its promises. Although it is unlikely that the capitalist narrative will be any more successful in its goal, it is to the former world which I shall restrict my observations.

For the countries of Eastern Europe, the 20th century was hardly humdrum. In addition to the physical destruction of two world wars and smaller armed struggles, there was massive dislocation of populations and the extended use of rule by terror and force. In 1980 Hungarian television aired a forty-five minute broadcast which showed that regardless of one's political leaning during the previous sixty years, at one time or another one had suffered for it. Similarly, those who openly practiced too enthusiastically or too devotedly their Christian faith were appropriately bridled. A large majority of the population thus became apolitical and, as the presence of the Christian faith was methodically excluded from all aspects of everyday life, atheism took hold by attrition. The Hungarian population in particular had further to deal with the traumatic condition of being scattered in five different countries. Although the Christians of Eastern Europe and their churches and church institutions were maligned, persecuted and often suppressed during these difficult decades, the flame of the Gospel could never quite be extinguished. The Lord of history had reserved a different vision for this part of the world, one which was revealed in the events of 1989 when the communist story collapsed beneath the weight of its accumulated sins.

From hereon I would prefer to restrict my narrative to events which pertain to the Reformed Church of Hungary and to its sister Hungarian Reformed Church bodies found in seven of the countries bordering on Hungary. I choose to do this not only because otherwise the subject matter would be far too lengthy to cover but also because it is within the different bodies of this particular church that I have endeavoured to serve throughout the past fifteen years.

Once the dust had settled in the wake of the events of 1989, the churches found themselves to be the only organized institution which had weathered the passing of the totalitarian system. Although greatly weakened by their lengthy ordeal, Christians and their churches immediately recognized the opportunities inherent in the new but not-yet-determined social order and they plunged into the challenge: the idea of mission in both rebuilding the former institutions of the Reformed Church and in reaching out to the generations which had never heard the Gospel took on entirely new dimensions. The need for spiritual nourishment and moral guidance by a population deceived for decades was overwhelming and, despite sometimes valiant efforts, the Reformed Church proved often inadequate in providing what was needed. There was a need for inner renewal before its mission outreach could be effective.

Inner renewal concentrated on reclaiming and rebuilding church institutions. These included schools at all levels, diaconal centres for assisting the needy, publishing and publications, medical treatment centres, homes and community centres for the elderly, the handicapped or the orphaned. Pastors have taken up duties in public schools, hospitals and prisons to advise, instruct or comfort. With a little more than a decade of rebuilding behind it, despite its shortcomings, the Reformed Church has made impressive progress and its inner renewal is visible throughout the land. Slipping nicely from this initial phase into second gear, the Reformed Church has also attempted in many ways to reach those individuals and generations who grew up without ever having had any contact with the Gospel. Extensive efforts go into radio and television programmes and publication of quality Christian literature. In itself, this work is considered by the Church to be mission work and it in fact is but still belonging to the realm of inner mission.

For beyond this lies another field of mission, a field which the different bodies of the Hungarian Reformed Church have never had the energy to address until recently. What in human terms is considered to be the national tragedy of the Hungarian nation when in 1921 parts of its population were relegated to minority status in five neighbouring states can now in God's formative hands serve the building of His Kingdom. Throughout centuries the last bastion of the Reformation as it spread eastward from Wartburg and then from Geneva was the Reformed Church of Hungary. Nestled in the Carpathian Basin during these centuries, never feeling the need to go beyond the divide, it was content to deal with its inner

edification. At the time this was understandable because beyond the Carpathian divide in all directions lay the realm of the once-powerful Orthodox church. The twentieth century and especially the second half of this century has dramatically changed this. The Orthodox churches found in the different territories of the former Soviet Union suffered immense losses in both property and people, the Gospel has never been heard by the majority of the people living here. The Hungarian Reformed Churches have willingly now joined, if not helped spearhead, the effort of taking the Gospel to these people and to these lands. As director of the first historic missionary training school of the Reformed Church of the sub-Carpathian Ukraine [and of any Hungarian Reformed Church] I myself presided over the training of this church's first fourteen trained missionaries, some of whom serve in recently-established Ukrainian Reformed Church communities, some closer to home and others as far away as Odessa. Others of these missionaries serve in gypsy communities, happily sharing the Gospel with young and old, whether it be in teaching them to read and write or to sing new hymns. Working in co-operation with Dutch and North American Reformed Church bodies, the Reformed Church of the sub-Carpathian Ukraine has helped establish a Reformed Church seminary in Kiev. The opportunity to educate in the name of the Gospel is a window which the Lord has opened and it is one through which He will help us to step out to serve the world in His name.

Although this small Reformed Church is still very weak in a country whose economy is practically non-existent, it cannot ignore the daily challenges surrounding it. The word "mission" transcends everything it does. Its three secondary schools (established since 1993) endeavor to provide the best education possible while never neglecting to allow the Holy Spirit to have free movement in the classroom and among the students; in assisting in the organization of economic undertakings it hopes to ground groups or communities in the practice of Christian ethics.

When Dutch Reformed Christians who would refuse to be seen together in their native Netherlands can join forces to assist and support the mission work undertaken by the Reformed Church of the sub-Carpathian Ukraine, who is able to discern what exactly the Holy Spirit has moved in the heart? When a representative of the Hungarian Reformed Church attending a conference in Russia negotiating the possible return of valuable Reformed Church artifacts taken by retreating Second World War Soviet troops is able to openly speak the Gospel to calm the anger of intense negotiations and to soothe the open wounds of accumulated hurt, it is difficult to deny the existence and the work of the Holy Spirit. And wherever the Spirit moves mission is in progress. Seek the Spirit so that you can serve Him. And when you look out on the mystery of this purpose and you are able to see the first stages of its fulfillment, perhaps you, like Paul, will be moved to cry out in astonishment: "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgements and His ways past

finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been His counsellor? or who hath first given to Him, and it shall be recompensed unto Him again? For of Him, and through Him, and to Him are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen. (Romans 11:33-36)