

METHODISM IN HUNGARY

ZOLTÁN KOVÁCS

1898-1920: The Antecedents of Methodist Mission in Hungary and the “Macedonian Call”

The first representatives of Methodism in Hungary were Matthew Simpson, a bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and William Fairfield Warren, a minister of the New England Conference in 1857 after attending the World Convention of the Evangelical Alliance in Berlin, Germany. Enroute to Constantinople and Palestine following the convention, they interrupted their journey to spend a weekend in the Hungarian capital, Pest-Buda, at invitation of some anti-Habsburg opposition leaders they had met in Germany.¹ Five years later Warren, then Professor at the Methodist Episcopal Missionary Institute in Berlin and Ludwig Sigismund Jacoby, founder and superintendent of the Germany Missionary conference, stopped again in Pest-Buda for three days. They were hosted by Adrian van Ansel, a former Methodist lay minister in Hamburg who pastored the German-speaking Reformed Affiliated Church in the Hungarian capital.² Despite these early positive encounters, a permanent Methodist work was not established in Hungary until the 1890s.

Two circumstances appear to have influenced the beginning of missionary activities at that time. Probably the most important local factor was a group of Swabian men in the Bácska region of southern Hungary. A schoolteacher subscribed to *Der Christliche Apologete*, a periodical published in Cincinnati/Ohio, through which the Christian based temperance circles of Újverbász (Vrbaš in Serbia today) and Bácsszenttamás (Srbobran) had learned of Methodism and decided to contact a Methodist minister. The first two attempts to establish a relationship failed, but the young pastor of Vienna, Robert Möller was willing to respond to the invitation.

The second important factor was the hostile attitude of the Vienna authorities against the “irritating” Methodist presence. The absolutist Habsburg dynasty was not known for its tolerance, especially in the heart of the Empire. Möller’s activity was hindered repeatedly by a series of administrative hurdles during 1896, but he hoped for better opportunities in the “other wing of Franz Joseph’s Dual Monarchy” where there was constitutional religious liberty. His

¹ William Burt, *Europe and Methodism* (Cincinnati, OH: Jennings & Graham, 1909), 85.

² Warren’s recollections of these visits were published fifty years later in *Evangelist für Österreich-Ungarn* 1913/112 and 1914/3. This semi-monthly periodical begun by Otto Melle in Budapest in 1912 was later renamed *Evangelist für die Donauländer* which was published in Vienna.

first attempt to plant a church in Pozsony³ was a failure. As a “foreigner” he was not even allowed to speak to the public. Shortly thereafter he received another invitation to work in other Austrian territories and in “all parts” of Hungary (Újverbász, Budapest, Kassa, Sopron). Although Möller was unable to establish communities in Bohemia and Moravia he had some success in Budapest.⁴ Encouraged by the “enthusiastic response,” Möller decided to start a permanent work in the city, receiving support from his district superintendent, Carl Schell.⁵

By July, the members of the North Germany Conference gave approval for the Methodist mission in Hungary. However, Schell suggested that Möller should focus on the German-speaking minority because of the language barriers.⁶ Following this advice, Möller arrived in the Bácska region in November, 1898, nearly two years after his first invitation.⁷ He established three permanent preaching points at Újverbász, Bácsszenttamás, and Feketehegy which marked the “official” beginnings of Methodism in Hungary (1898).⁸

First Pioneers in the Bácska Region

Möller continued to serve his church in Vienna, and upon his request, Bishop John Morgan Walden “appointed a young man named Franz Havránek, attaching him technically to the Vienna charge under Möller’s supervision, but actually assigning him to residence in Bácsszenttamás.”⁹ Hungary’s first Methodist preacher did not fulfill the hopes pinned on him. Under heavy pressure,¹⁰ the young preacher withdrew from ministry and left the country. Bishop William Burt concludes that by doing so, he “proved himself to be unworthy, and did the work much harm,” but Coplestone gives him the credit for the for-

³ Bratislava in Slovakia today, only about thirty miles from Vienna.

⁴ In January, 1898, he was the guest speaker of the German-speaking Reformed Affiliated Church, “preaching ten times in five days.”

⁵ Although Methodist work in Austria was begun in 1870 by the Mission of the Wesleyan Methodist Church of Britain in Germany, in June, 1897, the Vienna congregation merged with the North Germany Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Europe and became a circuit of the Berlin District.

⁶ Approximately 10% of the Hungarian population was German.

⁷ Judit Lakatos, ed., *Keskenyutak. Tanulmányok a Magyarországi Metodista Egyház történetéről* (Budapest: Magyarországi Metodista Egyház, 2005), 44-46. Paul Neff Garber, *The Methodists of Continental Europe* (New York: The Methodist Church, Editorial Department, Division of Education and Cultivation, General Section, Board of Missions and Church Extension, 1949), 21. Roy Hunter Short, *History of Methodism in Europe. Based upon the unfinished manuscript of Bishop N. Garber* (Office of the Secretary of the Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church, 1980), 89.

⁸ Burt writes in 1909: “The evangelization of Hungary is especially important because Hungary is the boundary between the Orient and Occident” (*Europe and Methodism*, 87).

⁹ J. Tremayne Coplestone, *History of Methodist Missions Vol. 4. Twentieth-century Perspectives* (New York: The United Methodist Church, 1973), 331. Havránek arrived in the Bácska on September 19, 1899.

¹⁰ The local police prohibited Havránek from holding gatherings and fined three men for participation in secret meetings who “barely escaped going to jail for nonpayment of the fines.”

mation of three congregations (Újverbász, Óverbász, Bácsszenttamás)¹¹ and the gathering of twelve probationers.¹²

In July, 1900, several members of the North Germany Conference proposed to abandon the missionary work in Hungary, but Carl Shell was willing to give the Bácska one more chance. A young graduate of the Frankfurt seminary, Otto Melle made himself available for service. He was twenty-five when he arrived in Hungary on December 8, 1900, and all he found was a “small flock of disappointed and threatened believers.” Although he was welcomed cordially in Bácsszenttamás (where he set up residence), his introduction in Újverbász on the first day of Christmas was not without incident. The local judge let the congregation know that if they invited a missionary from Germany, they would all be arrested and the foreigner expelled.¹³

Melle was not intimidated and tried to negotiate with the magistrate but without success. Local authorities had enough power to invalidate the policy of religious freedom. Coplestone recorded the harsh words used by the judge: “What are you doing here in Hungary? There is religion enough in my district; we need no foreign missionaries here, and I tell you that I will never allow you to preach.”¹⁴ Following the strict rule, the young Methodist did not “preach” in front of his massive Christmas audience, but rather conducted the service in a form of Catechism, which was not explicitly forbidden. Short writes that “many people were converted at this Christmas puzzle service.”¹⁵ His self-confident non-confrontational behavior later won the cooperation of the magistrate.¹⁶

Otto Melle: The Settling of Methodism and Expansion to Budapest

The steadfastness of Melle brought progress. Around January, 1904, a small youth group of Hungarian men was formed by Johannes Jakob, a second generation German who spoke Hungarian and who became the first Hungarian preacher in 1907. Methodist work expanded because of Melle’s efforts. From early on, he established some smaller preaching stations in the area: Kucora, Feketehegy, Szeghegy. In 1902, he tried to evangelize in Szerémség (Syrmia) but was expelled from the area. In Újvidék (Novi Sad), however, his efforts were crowned with success, and—in the fall of 1904—the new Methodist

¹¹ Coplestone, *History of Methodist Missions*, 331, 351. Coplestone writes that there were 120 people in Havránek’s congregation at Bácsszenttamás and 35 at Óverbász. Khaled notes that the American author probably mixed up the numbers (Lakatos, ed., *Keskeny utak*, 55).

¹² The ceremony was led by Robert Möller on May 20, 1900. Contrary to the witness of the original membership roll Coplestone mentions 14 probationers (*History of Methodist Missions*, vol. iv, 331).

¹³ Lakatos, ed., *Keskeny utak*, 55.

¹⁴ Coplestone, *History of Methodist Missions*, 332. The author incorrectly locates the event in Bácsszenttamás.

¹⁵ Short, *History of Methodism in Europe*, 90.

¹⁶ In fact, the real force behind the hostility towards Methodists was the denominational chauvinism of some clergymen. But their plot to eliminate Methodism by sending a new Lutheran minister to Bácsszenttamás failed on the resistance of the people (at least ten members left the Lutheran church).

community of about seventy people received its own pastor, Robert Schuldt who immediately started to serve in the neighboring Tiszakálmánfalva as well. On April 7, 1902, another important event took place. On his way to Bulgaria, Bishop John Heyle Vincent preached in Újverbász and committed himself to send an associate minister. The bishop had kept his promise and the next year Hugo Georgi was there to help Melle carry out the ministry in Hungary. By the time the new bishop, William Burt, visited the Bácska in 1904, Methodism has secured its future in Hungary's Bács-Bodrog county.¹⁷

1905 marked another important milestone. Soon after Georgi arrived in the Bácska, Melle was able to shift his focus to strategic tasks. With the support of Bishop William Burt, he received a new appointment to minister in Budapest. The first prayer meeting in Budapest was held on November 16 with six participants. The magistrate gave Melle permission to preach and he had his first public service on Tuesday, November 21. He distributed flyers on the streets and advertised the event in the local German newspapers. As a result, about twenty people showed up, although most of them were other ministers and missionaries who came to encourage the young Methodist preacher.

Melle led Bible study on Sundays and preached on Tuesdays in Budapest, but he spent the rest of the week in the Bácska (about 140 miles from the capital). By the end of the year, he had 30 regular attendees. On January 14, 1906, with the help of a translator, he conducted the first Hungarian service. By May 20, Budapest had eight Methodist probationers.

The episcopal visitation in April had a great significance for the further development. Bishop William Burt had a meeting with Albert Apponyi, the Hungarian Minister of Religion and Education, and in the next year (summer of 1907) Austria-Hungary became an independent District (separate from Berlin) with Melle as superintendent.¹⁸ In the same year, Johannes Jakob graduated from the Frankfurt seminary and joined Melle in Budapest as the first Hungarian Methodist minister. He immediately started to preach in Hungarian, and extended his ministry to nearby Palotaújfalú. Under the fruitful leadership of Melle and Jakob, the congregation grew. In January, 1910, Melle published the first regularly issued periodical of Methodism in Hungary with the title *Békeharang* (Peace Bell).

The Ministries of Martin Funk and Márk Kuszli

In Bácsszenttamás, however, several associate pastors¹⁹ complained that the initial enthusiasm had cooled down. The work gained new momentum only

¹⁷ There were three full-time German-speaking preachers in the region and a young Hungarian man in the Frankfurt seminary. Hungary was a separate Circuit of the North Germany Conference (independent from Vienna) since 1901. Impressed with the development, Burt actually declared Hungary the "most promising field in all Europe" and concluded his chapter on Hungary as follows: "Surely here is a wide-open door for the preaching of the gospel. Here is a coming nation which must be won for Christ" (*Europe and Methodism*, 87f).

¹⁸ According to Copplestone, there were 287 church members in the new District: 120 in Hungary, and 167 in Vienna (*History of Methodist Missions*, 335).

¹⁹ Otto Hänel, Ernst Voigt, and Albert Ohlrich.

in 1908, after Osmar Martin Funk began his three years' ministry. Similarly to Melle, Funk was 25 when he arrived in the Bácska. He did not let himself be discouraged by the passivity of the laity, but carried on the mission of the church with new zeal.²⁰ But it would be a mistake to suggest that Funk alone was responsible for the revitalizing of the Bácska communities. Between 1908 and 1912, both Újverbász and Újvidék were served by permanent pastors²¹ who contributed significantly to the progress. The first Hungarian Methodist chapel, which could seat three hundred people, was opened on November 5, 1911, in Újvidék.

Another important figure of the period was Funk's assistant, Márk Kuszli.²² Melle charged him to carry out the Methodist mission among Hungarians in the Bácska. At the age of 38, he was a gifted and trustworthy lay preacher. For three years he commuted between Budapest and Bácsszenttamás. The first tangible result of his ministry was the gathering of the first Hungarian probationers in February, 1908. But not every member of the German congregation was supportive of the Hungarian work. Traditionally there has been a certain amount of tension between nationalities in that region. Although Funk and Kuszli tried to introduce a joint service once a month, the two churches (German and Hungarian) separated in 1909. Kuszli succeeded in establishing two additional congregations in the area: Óbecse and Csurog.²³ Impressed by Kuszli's successful ministry, Melle decided to assign him the Hungarian work in Budapest in 1910 (Johannes Jakob had left the city for unknown reason). But the next minister in Bácsszenttamás resigned after the first week and the promise of development was not realized in the region until Kuszli finally returned on September 22, 1911.

The Strengthening of Methodism and World War I

By 1911, the expansion of Methodism in the Dual Monarchy reached a point when the ministry could not be effectively supervised from Berlin anymore. Bishop William Burt organized the District of Austria-Hungary into a Mission Conference.²⁴ As a result of the change in structure, the new Conference superintendent, Otto Melle and his family had to move to Vienna and appointed Martin Funk as pastor of the Budapest congregation while Paul

²⁰ Although at the time of his arrival Bácsszenttamás already had two preaching stations (Sóvé and Kiskér), Funk expanded the work to Újzsvác, Zombor, Torzsa and Cservenka. In November, 1910, he even went to Transylvania for a four-day preaching tour (Kolozsvár, Nagyszében, Szászsebes).

²¹ Hermann Melle, Alfred Mehner.

²² He belonged to Johannes Jakob's circle and became a trial member of the Bácsszenttamás church in 1905 but then he moved to Budapest.

²³ An attempt to form a congregation in Bácsföldvár (Bačko Gradište) failed. The Catholic priest raised general opposition and the local magistrate forbid to hold Methodist services. Kuszli "was warned that he would be killed if he did not leave the town" (Coppstone, *History of Methodist Missions*, 338).

²⁴ The opening session was held in Vienna between May 4 and 7. In Hungary there were 18 congregations in 4 circuits. There were two congregations in Budapest and Bácsszenttamás (both German and Hungarian) (Lakatos, ed., *Keskeny utak*, 94).

Riedinger became Funk's successor in Bácsszenttamás. Funk left his larger circuit with ambivalent feelings but soon after his arrival in the capital he was able to make use of his creativity. Responding to the social needs in the community an apartment home for young men was opened on November 10 and an unparalleled social care centre in 1912.²⁵ Before the outbreak of the World War two new preaching stations were added to Budapest.²⁶

The War especially affected the German Methodist pastors in Hungary because they were called to military service in Germany.²⁷ But despite all the difficulties, sufferings, and tragedies, Methodist work continued at its normal pace both in Budapest and in the Bácska. On September 3, 1916, for example, Bishop Nuelsen dedicated a new three-story headquarters building for the Budapest congregation (Felsőerdősor St. 5).²⁸ The purchase was made possible with the generous support of Fanny Nast Gamble, who was the sister of Albert Nast,²⁹ the publisher of *Der Christliche Apologete*. Before Mrs. Gamble³⁰ died, she donated "the largest gift in the long history of Methodist foreign missions, namely the sum of \$220,864" from which Budapest received \$51,670 in 1915³¹ (the headquarters was bought for 308,000 crowns on February 18, 1906).³² The next year, in 1917, a girl's home was opened on the third floor of the building.

The growth in the Bácska was marked by the increasing number of preach-

²⁵ Three lawyers, one doctor and the pastor of the church offered legal, medical and pastoral counseling for those in need of support.

²⁶ Coplestone adds an important nuance to our understanding of Methodism's status consolidation in Hungary. He writes that "Hungarian churches were functionally, as well as legally, freer than those in Austria" and reports that police troubles had gradually come to an end. By the time the Austria-Hungary Mission Conference gathered in Budapest (1913), the Hungarian public opinion on Methodism was positive enough for the local newspapers to cover the meeting in detail. Bishop John Louis Nuelsen even lectured in the Parliament on "Methodism and the Social Question" (Coplestone, *History of Methodist Missions*, 338f.).

²⁷ According to Coplestone, "half the ministers were mobilized, and there came a time when there was only one ordained minister left on church duty in Hungary" (*History of Methodist Missions*, 503). Even superintendent Melle had to serve the Central Powers' army in Zwickau for seven months. Funk was assigned to Leipzig.

²⁸ Since Methodism was not officially recognized yet, the building had to be registered to the church's Book Concern created some years earlier (Kersztyén Könyvesház).

²⁹ Albert Nest and Otto Melle knew each other personally since 1913, when Melle came to the United States as a delegate to the Lake Mohonk Conference of the World Students' Christian Federation.

³⁰ She was the daughter of William Nast, the "Patriarch of German Methodism," and daughter-in-law of James Gamble, the soap maker who co-founded Procter & Gamble.

³¹ Short, *History of Methodism in Europe*, 116.

³² Lakatos, ed., *Keskeny utak*, 100f.

ing stations,³³ assistant pastors³⁴ and buildings.³⁵ However, despite the promising development, a sad and tragic event took place in 1917. The ongoing conflicts between Hungarian and German nationals in Bácsszenttamás led to the first “small” schism of Methodist history in Hungary. At the end of the year—in the presence of superintendent Melle—the assistant preacher of the Hungarian congregation, Kuszli, had been removed from the list of ministers. The most painful effect of his exclusion was that several members left the church.

Unfortunately, the peace after the War had not brought any relief to the country. On March 21, 1919, radical socialists established a soviet republic in Hungary (Tanácsköztársaság). During the four months period of “red terror” the new headquarters building in Budapest was communized and Funk received life threats from the workers’ council.³⁶ Although this first soviet republic fell soon, the real devastation came only afterwards. On June 4, 1920, the peace dictate of Trianon/France was signed, breaking the country into pieces. Compared to the pre-war Kingdom, Hungary lost two thirds of its territory³⁷ and one-third of the ethnic Hungarian population found itself outside the newly drawn borders. What did it mean for Methodism in Hungary? Due to the political “developments,” there remained only one single congregation with one pastor in the country. All of the Bácska circuits became part of Yugoslavia: Methodism in Hungary lost 82% of its members and 85% of its preachers. In September, 1919, Bishop Nuelsen reorganized the former Austria-Hungary Mission Conference into three Districts.³⁸ In 1920, the General Conference permanently ratified the changes.³⁹

³³ Khaled mentions (Lakatos, ed., *Keskeny utak*, 102f) Péterréve (1912); Kula, Palánka, Szeged/Csongrád county (1913); Csantavér, Kiszhegyes, Topolya, Kiskőrös/Pest-Pilis-Solt-Kiskun county, Nagybecskerek/Torontál county (1914); Ada, Kissztapárpuszta and Magyarankizsa (1915).

³⁴ Associate ministers in the region between 1912 and 1917: Georg Sebele, Karl Kreutzer, Gustav Malac, Oswald Bickel, Weninger (first name unknown), J. Mohr, Ferdinand Mayr and Márk Kuszli (Lakatos, ed. *Keskeny utak*, 105). Melle’s former assistant in Budapest, Johannes Jakob was assigned to Újverbász in 1912. In 1913, Heinrich Mann became Bácsszenttamás’s new pastor because Paul Riedinger moved to the Újvidék circuit.

³⁵ New chapels were erected in Szeghegy (1912), Óbecse (1913), Kiskér (1915), Tiszakálmánfalva (1916) and Újszivác (1917). In Cservenka, the average attendance at Sunday school was between 150 and 180. As part of their social outreach ministry during the War, the Bácsszenttamás circuit established a home for orphans in 1916.

³⁶ “One day the power will be ours and we will hang you together with all the other priests. Although you are more enlightened . . . but still worthy of hanging” (Lakatos, ed., *Keskeny utak*, 107f. and 123).

³⁷ 32% of the land was given to the neighboring Romania, 19% to Czechoslovakia, 19% to the newly formed Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (later Yugoslavia) and 1% to Austria.

³⁸ German Austria: 3 churches, 4 preachers, 273 members; Hungary: 1 congregation (Budapest), 1 minister (Martin Funk), 109 members; Yugoslavia: 4 congregations, 6 pastors (Johannes Jakob, Georg Sebele, Ferdinand Mayr, Karl Kreutzer, Oswald Bickel, Ferdinand Drum), 500 members.

³⁹ Coppelstone, *History of Methodist Missions*, 989; and Lakatos, ed., *Keskeny utak*, 108.

1920-1945: Legal Status of Methodism during the Interwar Period

As a natural result of the extreme loss caused by the “Treaty” of Trianon, the era between the two Wars had been characterized by Christian conservative nationalism in Hungary. During this period, historical churches enjoyed many privileges in the strictly hierarchical society. Although the free exercise of religion was officially recognized since 1895, its interpretation was arbitrary. Christian churches were divided into three categories: Established churches, officially recognized churches, and free churches. Methodists were in the third category, among the “tolerated” churches, and thus, they remained “suspicious” and were treated as a sect until the end of the Horthy-era.⁴⁰ Diffendorfer’s vision was optimistic about the future when he wrote in 1923: “It cannot be said that relations with other Protestant bodies have been cordial in Hungary . . . but a better spirit of understanding is emerging, as it becomes clear that Methodism, the latest arrival, has no intention of proselyting from other Protestant bodies.”⁴¹ This belief has proved naïve by the fact that both the state and the large denominations tried to eliminate, or at the very least, to ignore free churches. Methodist members had to pay church taxes for the support of the historical churches, too.⁴² But thanks to their good international relations and active social outreach ministry, Methodists were exempted from some of the discriminative regulations. They did not have to report their meetings to the police and even children were allowed to attend services (although they were often beaten by priests and teachers for visiting Methodist Sunday schools).

New Beginning and a Decade of Growth

The first condition for the reestablishment of Methodism in Hungary was a question of human resources. Fortunately more and more new pastors and congregational workers appeared on the scene. Another important event was the visit of an American Methodist delegation in January, 1920.⁴³ Prime Minister Károly Huszár took them for a ride in his car to experience the aftermath of the War. As a result, the first 300,000 crown donation was followed soon by

⁴⁰ Admiral Miklós Horthy was the Regent of Hungary from March 1, 1920 to October 15, 1944.

⁴¹ Ralph E. Diffendorfer, ed., *The World Service of the Methodist Episcopal Church. An encyclopedic account of the work of a denomination throughout the world, presented region by region* (Chicago: The Methodist Book Concern, 1923), 217.

⁴² In 1925, Funk wrote: “We have had a year of struggle and difficulty. The established churches have used every means possible to suppress our Methodist work. We have been accused of being ‘burdensome foreigners,’ ‘agitators of the people,’ ‘Bolshevists,’ ‘heterodox teachers,’ and ‘false prophets.’ Detectives, policemen and soldiers have been sent to our meetings and many times they were forbidden. Two of our pastors were arrested during their revival work” (Copplesone, *History of Methodist Missions*, 997).

⁴³ Three bishops, J. L. Nuelsen, W. Burt, W. O. Shepard; a journalist, A. J. Buche; and a factory owner, H. Crawors.

a 10,000,000 crown war relief fund.⁴⁴ The attractive force of the generous foreign relief assistance probably contributed to the tripling of membership in just one year from 115 in 1920 to 340 a year later. The third factor of growth was the desire of many people for deeper community which remained unfulfilled in the rigid framework of the established churches. Based on puritan principles, small groups of believers were spontaneously founded throughout the country. The intolerant policy of the historical churches in general and liberal Protestantism in particular toward every form of pietism resulted in ongoing conflicts between the *ecclesia* and the *ecclesiola*.

Since these “little churches within the church” did not receive spiritual nourishment but instead rejection from the mainline pastors they were gradually experiencing greater affinity with the free churches. The Slovak-speaking “pietist” group of Nyíregyháza started out as an *ecclesiola* in the Lutheran church around 1905 and grew into a congregation of over 100. In April, 1921, 110 people joined the Methodist church.⁴⁵ Similar developments have taken place in Kaposszekcső and Borjád, too (Baranya county).

The Methodist expansion was marked by the purchase and erection of new buildings. With American and Swedish support, Bishop Nuelsen bought a property for a Methodist social center at Budakeszi in 1921.⁴⁶ Filled with enthusiasm over the progress, Bishop Nuelsen reorganized the Hungary Mission as a Mission Conference.⁴⁷ However, the bishop had to personally raise money because the Centenary Movement failed and the Board cut the Mission funds by 50%. There was a “discouraging shrinking” in the work with the number of ministers and congregational workers diminished. In 1925, the Bible school

⁴⁴ Short wrote that “in 1921 superintendent Funk reported the distribution of much food and clothing sent from America. This created great interest in the work the Methodists were doing; it was estimated that Methodists did a larger relief work than any other free or established church,” (*History of Methodism in Europe*, 117).

⁴⁵ Between 1911 and 1920, József Rohacsek, a former Lutheran minister, organized the community according to the Methodist model he got to know in Vienna. In 1920, Rohacsek was convicted on frame-up charges and had to leave the city. But the congregation was not frightened and its members turned to the Methodist superintendent for help. Funk appointed a local lay preacher, József Harmann to lead the community.

⁴⁶ The project would cost 350,000 crowns—of which Hungary raised 20,000—and began as an orphanage, but the children’s home was later extended with a home for the aged, a deaconess sanatorium (for the care of tubercular patients), and a Bible school. In 1923, Diffendorfer wrote: “In Budapest and its environs, the church must conduct a diversified social program, with emphasis upon the teaching of temperance, upon the development of Sunday schools and other work for young people, night classes for laborers, and classes in home economics for women, and upon a widespread distribution of literature. An industrial school for women and girls is planned in one town, and a home for laborers in another Equipment for aggressive evangelistic campaigns is required” (*The World Service of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 217f.).

⁴⁷ In 1924, Nuelsen said: “The story of our work in Hungary is a marvel. I question a better anywhere in the world; an investment of \$5,000 per year is yielding large returns. But the appropriation is pitifully inadequate. With \$15,000 to \$20,000 a year we could revolutionize the religious life of the nation” (Garber, *The Methodists of Continental Europe*, 79).

and the girl's home had to be discontinued.⁴⁸

Despite the financial and political difficulties by the end of the 1920s, Methodism in Hungary had recovered from the disastrous loss of the Bácska region. In 1928, the Annual Conference organized the church into three districts. In 1931, the relatively consolidated condition of the church (approximately 10 ministers, 10 circuits and 1,000 members) enabled Martin Funk to leave Hungary for a new appointment in Germany and to give up his position to a local leader. But the optimism was unfounded. In the 1930s, Methodist expansion had slowed down in the country. Part of the reason was that the leadership style represented by Funk's successor Conference Superintendent, János Tessényi (Johannes Jakob) was considerably authoritarian. Parallel with the developments in society, the democratic principle wanted with decision-making became more concentrated in one man. It is no wonder that "institutional solidarity" had more and more taken the place of personal evangelism. However, Methodism still played an important role in the slowly rising Protestant revival movement. In May, 1936, for instance, the Hungarian Evangelical Alliance was founded with the active participation of the Methodist church.

World War II

Between 1938 and 1945 the religious situation in the country was predominantly influenced by the international political developments. After the Munich Treaty of 1938 and the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Germans, Admiral Horthy tried to seize the historic opportunity and reclaim Hungary's lost territories.⁴⁹ But the price was high: Hungary agreed to become an active satellite country of the Axis powers. In 1941, the Hungarian army participated in the invasion of Yugoslavia and took over most of the regions lost in the First War (including the Bácska). It must be emphasized that Horthy's regime was not a committed Nazi one. In 1942, a secret delegation was sent to Istanbul and sought the possibility of a peace treaty with the Allied forces,⁵⁰ however, with no success. Finally, Hungary suffered from both the German occupation (March, 1944) and soon after, from the Russian invasion.

During the last year of the War, church activities were almost impossible to carry out. But the greatest difficulties were financial in nature due to the lack of foreign support and the general poverty. The worship place of the Hungarian congregation inside the Methodist headquarters building in Budapest was

⁴⁸ Short, *History of Methodism in Europe*, 118. Coplestone mentions that the Board temporarily restored the original sum, but Hungary's appropriation later dropped even more drastically: \$1,935 in 1934 and \$967 in 1935. Bishop Nuelsen wrote: "There is no field in the Zurich Area, perhaps none in the whole Church, where more has been accomplished with pitifully small resources . . ." (*History of Methodist Missions*, 997).

⁴⁹ With the support of Germany and Italy, the First Vienna Decision of November, 1938 gave back a section of Slovakia mainly populated by Hungarians, and five months later Subcarpathian Ruthenia was regained too. In 1940, the Second Vienna Decision forced Rumania to give up a large part of Transylvania.

⁵⁰ The negotiations were led by Albert Szent-Györgyi, the Nobel Prize winner biochemist.

turned into a regular apartment and hired out for rent. Even the bookstore of the Book Concern had to be sold.⁵¹ However, as an institution, the Methodist church had “profited” from the War. In 1939, after Subcarpathian Ruthenia was regained, the Slav-speaking congregations of Ungvár, Munkács and Ókemenca suddenly became part of the Hungarian Mission Conference. The next year, the Hungarian János Haszits received his appointment to Ungvár. With the return of Northern Yugoslavia in 1941, both the number of Methodist preachers and also the number of members doubled. The former Yugoslavian superintendent, György Sebele became a district superintendent of Hungary. The “historical” Conference of 1941 was held by Bishop Otto Melle at the largest congregation in Nyíregyháza. The Bishop believed that the Conference might be a new starting point for the reunited work. But the hope soon died as the War intervened. In 1944 the annual conference had to be canceled and the church’s newspaper (Békeharang) discontinued. The dreams turned into a nightmare again. Short provides a graphic account of the horrors in the capital: “The Russians took over a city where the royal palace was in ruins, all bridges across the Danube destroyed; the glory of Budapest had vanished. The Russians exacted heavy reparations and Hungary had to return to its World War I boundaries”⁵²

Without doubt, the most remarkable “Methodist” achievement during the War was the rescue of more than 60,000 Jews in Budapest from deportation to Nazi concentration camps.⁵³ Between 1942 and 1945 the Swiss vice consul, Carl Lutz—a Methodist layman—and his wife, Gertrud Lutz-Frankhauser, issued tens of thousands of protective letters for Hungarian Jews. They also established “safe houses” by extending diplomatic immunity to 76 buildings throughout the capital. The most famous among them was the so-called Glass House which offered protection for more than 3,000 Jews; it was turned into a museum in 2005. Carl Lutz has been honored by the state of Israel with the title of “Righteous Among the Nations.”⁵⁴

1945-1989: From German Invasion to Communist Regime and the Escape of János Tessényi

The “liberation” of Hungary by the Red Army actually meant new occupation and the country gradually became a satellite state of the Stalinist Soviet Union. As part of the reconfiguration of Europe, all three Allies agreed to

⁵¹ Lakatos, ed., *Keskeny utak*, 136f.

⁵² Short, *History of Methodism in Europe*, 118.

⁵³ Garber, *The Methodists of Continental Europe*, 102f.

⁵⁴ This presentation of his activity was important because his name has hardly been mentioned by Methodist sources. Bishop Streiff assumes this is due to his affair with another woman. Many conservative Christians of that time concluded that Lutz was not a good Methodist—judged on the basis of moral character (Patrick Philipp Streiff, *Der Methodismus in Europa im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* [Stuttgart: Medienwerk der Evangelisch-methodistischen Kirche, 2003]; *EmK-Geschichte*, Vol. 50, 201). While 550,000 of Hungary’s 800,000 Jews were executed during the Holocaust, Budapest is the only capital in Central Eastern Europe where more than 100,000 Jews have survived. Approximately half of the survivors owed their life to Lutz.

the policy of forced migrations. Mass expulsions and population exchanges began in January, 1946. In some parts of the country, the original population was totally replaced by new settlers. Nearly two-thirds of the Methodists left Hungary shortly after the War.⁵⁵ The very existence of the Methodist church was threatened. The remaining congregations faced the serious dilemma of joining another evangelical church.

The financial situation was desperate. Methodists have been cut off from foreign support and not even Bishop Garber was allowed to enter the country.⁵⁶ The recovery happened in unexpected way. Renewal of Methodism came with the general revival among the youth. The evangelization events in Döbrököz, Nyíregyháza and Györköny have brought forth a new generation of workers: Tibor Iványi, Magdolna Sinka, Andor Szabó, Cecília Varga, Antónia Wladár and János Szuhánszki. Two new congregations were formed in Szolnok and Hidas.⁵⁷ Another reason to hope for recovery was Moscow's seemingly tolerant behavior toward Hungary.⁵⁸ But the joy did not last for long because in 1947 Communists took control, and "although the Methodist church was for the first time officially recognized in Hungary in November, 1947, this was followed two months later by the arrest of several Methodist preachers."⁵⁹

The fate of superintendent János Tessényi is symbolic of much what happened under the Stalinist dictatorship of Mátyás Rákosi. In the spring of 1948, he was taken to the dreaded headquarters of the secret police (House of Terror Museum today) where he was "asked" to be an agent for the government and get information about the Lutheran Bishop Lajos Ordass.⁶⁰ Of course, the only alternative was prison.⁶¹ "As he realized that at his age he could not stand

⁵⁵ Both the circuit of Borjád/Baranya county and the German congregation of Budapest were dissolved while the Slovak-speaking church of Nyíregyháza—the largest in Hungarian Methodism with 500 members and two pastors (József Márkus and Jenő Liebstöckl)—moved to Czechoslovakia as a unit (Short, *History of Methodism in Europe*, 119).

⁵⁶ It is worthy to quote Garber: "Formerly there had been an income from the rent of apartments in the headquarters building in Budapest and from fees from the sanatorium at Budakeszi. The loss of rents through increased taxation, the decreased work at the sanatorium, plus the economic inflation, destroyed almost all of these sources of income. The orphanage at Budakeszi had to be closed In 1948 the highest salary paid in Hungarian Methodism was \$56 per month, while eight supply pastors were receiving only \$13 per month" (*The Methodists of Continental Europe*, 117).

⁵⁷ Lakatos, ed., *Keskeny utak*, 191.

⁵⁸ In November, 1945, the Soviets let the Independent Party of Smallholders win the elections. Prime Minister Zoltán Tildy was an ordained minister of the Reformed church.

⁵⁹ Garber, *The Methodists of Continental Europe*, 117. Short writes that "before World War II Hungarian Methodists had been looked upon as an unimportant sect of fanatics. However, on October 31, 1947, the government terminated the former distinction between 'individual' and 'recognized' confessions, and the Methodist church was included among the recognized churches. On November 6, 1947, a Communist official went to the Hungarian annual conference and surprised everyone by saying that Methodism had been officially recognized This meant that now Methodist pastors could perform marriage ceremonies, issue baptismal certificates, even teach religion in the public schools" (*History of Methodism in Europe*, 120).

⁶⁰ Lakatos, ed., *Keskeny utak*, 192.

⁶¹ According to Short, the charge against him was the practice of helping German Methodists find refuge in Hungary after they were expelled from Yugoslavia (*History of Methodism in Europe*, 120). The author mentions that Tessényi's name was given up by Antal Takáts, the supervising pastor of the Szeged congregation who was arrested and tortured under the same charge.

torture and seven years of imprisonment,” Tessényi agreed to cooperate and began to report on his colleague. However, Garber’s description of the superintendent as a “slave laborer for the Russians”⁶² is a little too harsh, especially in the light of the fact that already in 1939 Tessényi asked for his retirement, but Bishop Nuelsen urged him to keep his office.⁶³

In March, 1948, the Lutheran Bishop Ordass was allowed to make an official trip to Geneva. The Methodist superintendent and his wife were permitted to go with him, because Tessényi promised the officers that he will “get information on Hungarian refugees in Switzerland and certain Methodists, including Bishop Garber.”⁶⁴ After arriving in Switzerland, he told both Ordass and Garber about his secret commission and never returned to Hungary.

Growing Pressure and the Revolution of 1956

The political pressure, the isolation from the Western world, the lack of theological education and supervision, and the absence of the bishop from the annual conferences contributed to the inadequacy of the clergy. Hecker emphasizes that János Szécsey, the new superintendent, “lacked the gift of leadership” but was an exceptional evangelist. In this situation of crisis most of the “missionary” work was done by lay preachers and workers.

The oppression became worse from year to year.⁶⁵ Finally, the absolute control over people’s life was not bearable anymore and the sorrow, anger and despair exploded into revolution in 1956. On October 23, university students and workers started a nonviolent protest in the capital. The State Protection Authority fired upon them and the police’s brutality has led to a nationwide revolt. Prime Minister Imre Nagy announced his plan to withdraw from the Warsaw Pact and promised to re-establish free elections. But 2,500 Soviet tanks intervened and suppressed the revolution. Hundreds died in the street fights, hundreds were executed afterwards (including Imre Nagy), thousands were put on trial and imprisoned, and nearly 250,000 Hungarians left the country.⁶⁶ Despite the cruel retaliatory measures taken by the re-installed Communist system and the even stricter control over churches, Methodism did

⁶² Garber, *The Methodists of Continental Europe*, 93.

⁶³ Lakatos, ed., *Keskeny utak*, 137.

⁶⁴ Short, *History of Methodism in Europe*, 120f. Short writes that “when Tessényi endeavored to protect Bishop Garber by saying that he was a good man, the reply was, ‘Stop that kind of talk, for he is American and you cannot believe a word an American tells you. Beware of him.’”

⁶⁵ In the fall of 1948, the government confiscated the Budakeszi social centre. From 1949 on, the cruel actions of the State Protection Authority intensified (Államvédelmi Hatóság). In 1951, the State Office for Religious Affairs was established (Állami Egyházügyi Hivatal).

⁶⁶ Short gives touching accounts of Methodist solidarity: “The Hungarian revolt affected Hungarian Methodism, for among the refugees were Methodists who fled Hungary. The Methodist Committee for Overseas Relief made funds available. Bishop Ferdinand Sigg was able to give funds to the Austrian Methodists who took major responsibility for the relief program. In Vienna, the Second Church took up its pews and replaced them with cots for the refugees. At Linz, a home for young Hungarian refugee boys was opened. A number of Hungarian Methodists remained in Austria after the revolution while a few went to America” (*History of Methodism in Europe*, 121f.).

not experience noticeable loss in membership after the revolution, except for a relatively small number of individuals who emigrated (including pastor Dr. Artúr Szalós). In contrast to the ministers of larger denominations, Methodist preachers were not active in the uprising so they escaped police torture and political imprisonment. At the end of the year, a new superintendent had to be elected because of Szécey's illness.⁶⁷ In February, 1957, the government "cordially" approved the election of Ádám Hecker and even permitted him to attend the Central Conference in Switzerland.⁶⁸

Church Life under "Goulash Communism" and the Painful Split of 1974

During the decades of Socialism normal church activities were handicapped in many ways. Public proclamation of the Gospel was effectively prohibited and the freedom of worship strictly limited. The pastors' ministry license was restricted to their circuit and every "unusual" event (such as evangelism or summer children's camp) had to be reported to the competent state authorities. But even so—under the leadership of János Kádár—Hungary still was the "happiest barrack" in the Eastern Bloc, compared to hardcore Communism. Under the difficult circumstances, Methodism was able to slowly make progress. In addition to the several people who had entered ministry in 1957 (Ilona and András Vadászi, Frigyes Hecker and Lajos Elek), the Miskolc congregation erected a new building (1958-1959).⁶⁹ The work at Nyíregyháza and Budapest has shown promising signs of development too.

With the easing of the travel restrictions in the 1960s, isolation gradually became more moderate. Not only was Bishop Sigg was permitted to enter the country and make episcopal visitations but the Hungarian clergy were allowed to take occasional trips abroad as well.⁷⁰ The opening of the seminary of the Council of Hungarian Free Churches in 1967 was an important step forward in the quality of pastors' education. The Methodist Antónia Wladár, Hungary's first woman pastor, became a member of the faculty. By the end of the decade, a new ministry started to take roots. János Szuhánszki, the pastor of the Miskolc circuit established a station at Alsózsolca among the gypsies which was later turned into a flourishing community development centre.⁷¹

Of course not everybody was satisfied with the heavy compromises made by superintendent Ádám Hecker who had chosen the strategy of survival in-

⁶⁷ According to Hecker and Lakatos, the election had to be made by mail because of travel difficulties (Lakatos, ed., *Keskeny utak*, 194, 224).

⁶⁸ Short mentions that later in 1966, "the government permitted Hecker to make a visit to America and explain the Methodist situation in Hungary" (*History of Methodism in Europe*, 122).

⁶⁹ The building project had almost cost the local pastor (János Szuhánszki) and the superintendent their jobs because they only had verbal permission for the construction (Lakatos, ed., *Keskeny utak*, 194).

⁷⁰ Since 1964, the government has given its approval for a Methodist pastor each year to take a family vacation in Switzerland. The holiday resort of the World Council of Churches at Locarno was consciously designed to be a meeting point for ministers of the East and West.

⁷¹ Despite the hostile reactions from the authorities, mission has begun in Tuzsér and Kiszvárd (Nyíregyháza circuit), Abony (Szolnok circuit), Kisvaszar (Dombóvár circuit) and in Pestújhely (Budapest circuit) as well (Lakatos, ed., *Keskeny utak*, 231, 280f.).

stead of militant confrontation with the state.⁷² The younger generation of pastors demanded greater independence from the controlling authorities. The growing tension between Tibor Iványi's opposition group (minister at Nyíregyháza) and the superintendent climaxed in 1973 when the aging Hecker decided to resign from his position. Possibly Iványi benefited the most by this resignation, but his opponents realized that his proactive attitude represented great risk to the "peaceful" relationship with the government. Hecker announced the postponement of the election and remained in office although his mandate expired. Iványi did not acknowledge the superintendent's authority and repeatedly offended his superiors ("You have sold your souls to the devil"). Finally, in March, 1974, after a long and unsuccessful mediation process partially led by Bishop Franz Werner Schäfer, the disciplinary committee permanently suspended Iványi from his ministry.⁷³

Iványi did not accept the decision and continued to serve as a Methodist pastor. The church paid a huge price for his personal ambitions and lost three ordained ministers out of the ten (András Vadászi, Lajos Elek and Tibor Iványi). Three congregations were affected the most by the schism: Nyíregyháza, Szeged and Budapest. After his 1974 election, the new superintendent Frigyes Hecker (Ádám Hecker's son) tried to renew the negotiations but he could not resolve the conflict either. On October 1, 1981, the permanently separated group was granted permission to operate as a church.⁷⁴

The Last Decade of Socialism and the Change of System in 1989

Like so many times before in the short history of Methodism in Hungary, the way out of the crisis caused by the schism was found through the appearance of a young generation of pastors who reenergized the communities (they started seminary and ministry at the same time). Life slowly came back to normal by the strengthening of the role of laity, the expansion of international connections, and the improvement of church-state relations. The government admitted that its attempt to solve social problems with Socialist policies failed, and suddenly tried to take advantage of the community building and crime

⁷² The pithy statement proposed by Short is overly simplified: "The Communists have . . . been able to put persons loyal to the state in church positions. The pastors in the main have remained true to the faith" (*History of Methodism in Europe*, 122). Back in 1948, János Tessényi's example has already shown what "state loyalty" meant for a Methodist superintendent so it is best not to make hurried judgments based on preconceptions.

⁷³ It must be emphasized that both Sándor Palotay, the Chair of the Council of Hungarian Free Churches and Bishop Schäfer lined up on Hecker's side (Lakatos, ed., *Keskeny utak*, 197, 233-245). However, Lakatos does not hesitate to underline the fact that the bishop was supportive of the necessary compromises with Socialist dictatorships (242).

⁷⁴ Tibor Iványi made his dream a reality; he became President of the Hungarian Evangelical Fellowship (Magyar Evangéliumi Testvérközösség). Lukács writes ironically that the legal status prevented them from being a "underground martyr community" and thus representing true, confessing Methodism, as opposed to the recognized church (Lakatos, ed., *Keskeny utak*, 244). In 1987, they founded John Wesley Theological College (the seminary is a member of the Association of Free Methodist Educational Institutions) and the Oltalom ("Shelter") Charity Society (1989). The Fellowship declared itself independent from UMC and has eight congregations.

prevention potential of Christian churches. Methodists gladly joined in and focused their attention on the youth.⁷⁵

However, the new opportunities did not necessarily help Methodism to gain new members because the 1980s were full of contradictions. On the one hand, the state has gradually removed barriers to the spreading of the Gospel. But on the other hand, Christians still had to face many troubles. In 1986, Markos reported to the Radio Free Europe: “A devout Christian in Hungary today is still far from being a citizen with equal rights. Parents often hesitate to let their children receive religious instruction for fear of reprisals. Practicing Christians have difficulty in gaining admittance to institutions of higher education and are discriminated against in appointments to public office. While the churches and their members labor under many constraints in spreading and receiving the message of Christianity, the state is unhampered by restrictions in its efforts to neutralize the effects of this.”⁷⁶ Real freedom came only in 1989. The change of system took place without bloodshed and chaos. The hated Office for Religious Affairs was abolished, and—on October 23—Hungary proclaimed itself a Republic. In June, 1991, the last Soviet troops were withdrawn from the country.

Recent Developments and Final Conclusions

The past two decades since the democratic turn have been a time of adjustment for all denominations to the rapid changes in society. According to all indications, Hungarian Methodists have succeeded in finding their own niche and committed themselves to the priority of evangelism in word and deed. Their dedication for service to the Roma community and for prison ministry is especially appreciated. As a founding member of the Wesley Alliance (Hungarian “holiness movement”), the church demonstrated its rootedness in the Wesleyan tradition (1999). It is also a member of the Ecumenical Council of Churches in Hungary. In 1999, Hungarian Methodists—in a conciliatory tone—issued a declaration stating that the church regrets the 1974 events.

In addition to the “spiritual” mission, the Methodist church has tried to make the most of its financial resources too. Several new buildings were erected in the 1990s,⁷⁷ but superintendent István Csernák (elected in 1996) still mentioned that, due to the lack of experience, Methodists were unable to take full advantage of the restitution law which made possible the return of confiscated properties. Parts of the first headquarters building could not be regained but the church received compensation for them. During the years of Communism, the sanatorium at Budakeszi fell into disrepair and had to be restored. It was re-opened in 1998 as a home for the elderly.

⁷⁵ In 1978, the church set up a new committee to oversee children and youth ministry and entrusted János Szuhánszki and Judit Svastits with the task of coordination.

⁷⁶ Edith Markos, *Religious trends in Eastern Europe*, RAD Background Report/139 (October 1, 1986).

⁷⁷ Home for the elderly at Kaposzsekcső (1991); chapels at Szekszárd, Kistokaj (1991), Hetes (1996) and Szolnok (1999); new headquarters at Budapest (1999) (Lakatos, ed., *Keskeny utak*, 288).

The 2001 census indicated that there were 1,484 Hungarian Methodists.⁷⁸ This number has been growing at a moderate pace. In 2008, there were 13 preachers and approximately 2,100 members in 11 circuits (30 stations). There are two newspapers published by the Methodist Church: *Metodista* (twice-monthly periodical) and *MIX* (youth journal). Radio and television programs are broadcast as well.

What conclusion can be drawn from the fact that after 110 years of mission efforts, Methodism did not become a mass movement in Hungary? According to Weyer, “even where Methodism was resisted . . . not a few of the Wesleyan accentuations and methods were adopted by the established churches.”⁷⁹ The highest calling of Hungarian Methodism might be to stir Hungary out of its “ingrown, nominal Christianity—Christless Roman Catholicism and dead Protestantism.”⁸⁰ The challenge is enormous, as the task is to gradually change the attitude and mentality of a people who have lost their freedom fights basically during the past half millennium, and two-thirds of its population and territory during the last century. It is no wonder that pessimism, alcoholism, high suicide and divorce rates shackle the nation’s spirit—even as a recent member of the European Union (2004). Short’s words are still valid for today: “There is a deep religious spirit among Hungarian Methodists; they belong to the pietist type.”⁸¹

⁷⁸ Zsófia Csernák, “A metodistákról számokban,” *MIX* (Nov. 2002).

⁷⁹ In 1923, Diffendorfer wrote: “The best result up to the present is to be seen in the fifty pastors of the Reformed Church . . . who, although taunted by their colleagues as Methodists, are preaching the necessity for conversion and a new birth . . . Everywhere the emphasis is to be upon evangelism, in order to arouse as speedily as possible the forces latent in the Protestant churches and to give the gospel to the multitudes who have actual contact with no church or are mere formalists in religion” (*The World Service of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 217).

⁸⁰ Coplestone, *History of Methodist Missions* vol. 4, 333.

⁸¹ Short, *History of Methodism in Europe*, 119.