



Mini-History: UUAA Partner Church Program

Presented February 8, 2015 by Phyllis Valentine & Gretchen Jackson



GRETCHEN

It may surprise many of you that we have a Partner Church in Transylvania! We established this partnership at the Congregational Meeting in May of 1997 and were partnered with the Unitarian church in a small town named Kézdivásárhely.

Up until the end of WWI, Transylvania, was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. After the war, Transylvania became a part of Romania, a country with a very different culture and language. Life since then has been difficult for the Transylvanians, with poverty, fascism, another world war, Communism, and continuing ethnic conflict. Our partners are ethnic Hungarians living in Romania.

PHYLLIS

Our minister emeritus, Rev. Ken Phifer, was the initial force behind our partnership.

Late in the 1980's the world became aware of a plan by the Romanian dictator Ceaușescu to destroy hundreds of villages in order to build Communist style housing units. Many of those villages were Unitarian in religious practice. An international outcry rose up, largely through the efforts of UU's in America, and Ken and other ministers began speaking out about this outrage. The plan was stopped in its tracks. And the beginning of the partner church movement was underway organized through the UUA.

In 1996 Ken attended a talk by some Transylvanian ministers that moved him deeply. He decided that if enough people were interested that he would pursue the partner church idea with our congregation. He preached about the history and the present situation there and hosted a meeting to talk about what our congregation could do. Four UUAA members indicated they would be interested in taking charge of the partner church program. The congregation then voted to become a partner church...and we were partnered with the congregation in Kezdi.

In 1999 Ken was asked to be the keynote speaker at the European UU conference. ... which took place near Frankfurt, Germany. At that time Ed and Barbara Lynn were living only a few miles north of Frankfurt. After the talk, Ken and Barbara flew to Bucharest and were met by the congregation's minister, Rev. Maria Pap. They spent five days in Kezdi. Ken preached and they met and talked at length with the Rev. Pap, in particular trying to determine how we could best help them.

Seeing the deep devotion of these people to their religion, seeing the poverty of the town, seeing the courage with which they had for decades lived their lives, seeing the brilliance and energy of their young minister made the Partner Church Program come alive for them, and ...when they returned they were able to convey some of that excitement to the congregation.

The next year, Maria Pap made a trip to Ann Arbor. She preached for us, our congregation became engaged, and the program slowly took off.

Gretchen Jackson assumed leadership of the Partner Church Program in 2001. Since then, more than 30 people have traveled to Kezdi, either as part of a group or on their own. We've had Transylvanian visitors come to Ann Arbor. We have used those visits to enrich our mutual connections and understandings through services, sermons, meals, small group gatherings, newsletter articles, and other events. We provide financial assistance for the minister through a salary supplement and have also assisted with money for room and board for students attending the Unitarian University in Kolozsvár. Increasingly we sustain and enlarge personal connections through Facebook, where language barriers are greatly reduced through the use of photos and communication can be informal and much more frequent.

GRETCHEN

In 2012 Rev. Maria Pap took a new position in the Bishop's Office in Kolozsvár, and Rev. István Buzogány-Csoma became the new minister of our Partner Church program. As you may recall, he visited Ann Arbor last year and preached at UUAA.

Phyllis Valentine assumed the leadership role for our Partner Church Program in 2014 and led the most recent group of UUA travelers to Transylvania last summer.

Nancy Schewe, writing about that 2014 pilgrimage, said:

While I loved seeing all the sights... what was most thrilling to me was meeting real people who shared my religion. ...Most especially, I was moved by the Sunday service in Szentivánlaborfalva when nearly the entire village attended the Unitarian Church so that they could sing in the men's and women's ecumenical choirs. Istvan preached and Phyllis read a passage from the Bible. We shared the service; we shared our religion. I felt so honored to be there that morning. It is a service I will never forget.

Rev. Istvan closed that service by saying:

Being with you, we can feel that there is love, there are no differences, and there are no limits of language or culture ... there are roads which take us one to the other, there is community, humanity, acceptance, humility, patience...

Our partnership has been deeply grounded in both social justice and spiritual growth from the very beginning, enriching us and our partners. Through learning about their lives, religion, and issues we gain increased understanding of our own. We truly are partners in life.