

**Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church – Unitarian Universalist**  
**“Where It All Began”**  
**Association Sunday**  
**The Rev. Dr. Morris W. Hudgins**  
**October 4, 2009**

**Introduction**

On this Association Sunday, a day when we are encouraged to be mindful of our relationship with our larger religious association, it is appropriate to focus on the place where institutional Unitarian Universalism began—Eastern Europe. Transylvania and Poland were safe havens for radical Protestants. Transylvania, then a nation, but now a part of Romania, is the country where Unitarianism was born and grew as an institution. In 1991, after the overthrow of Ceausescu Americans were encouraged to partner with churches in Transylvania. Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church partnered with the church in Oltheviz, Romania.

I learned last year that the Partner Relationship between Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church and Oltheviz has been inactive for several years. There had been no correspondence from the minister or the members. Emails were not returned. The Partner Church committee was ready to end the Partnership. Barbara Beach and I have asked for some time to renew this relationship. We want to try again. We learned later that the minister’s email address had changed. He wasn’t receiving our correspondence.

I have had several communications in recent months with the minister, The Rev. Istvan Torok, and am hopeful. One of my goals with this service is to spark some interest in renewing the Partnership. I am encouraging our children here at TJMC to correspond with the children in the Oltheviz, Romania. The minister there, Istvan Torok, also wants this to happen.

I would like to create a committee that will work in renewing this relationship—working with the children in our church to become pen pals with children in Oltheviz, learn more about your Partner Church, its history, and its present struggles. Some Partner Churches failed in the beginning because no one in the church spoke Hungarian and the minister in Transylvania did not speak English. We don’t have that problem. The children in Oltheviz are learning English and the minister has been as well.

**Why This Connection?**

You may ask: Why is our relationship with churches in Transylvania important? My goal in this service is to answer this question.

If you visit almost any Unitarian Church in Transylvania you will find the words Egy Az Isten, One is the Lord. This is the motto of the Unitarians in Transylvania and Hungary. It is based on a belief in One God, and Jesus is a human prophet, not to be worshipped. If you look up the definition of Unitarianism in almost any dictionary, it will say a belief in one God.

One can argue that our religion today has moved beyond this definition and they would be right. We are now broader than this form of Unitarian Christianity. The Unitarians in Transylvania today are much like they were 300 years ago. Their view of an American Unitarian hero is still William Ellery Channing, who preached his form of Unitarian Christianity in the early 1800s in Boston. The Transylvanian tradition, like Channing, has promoted a liberal interpretation of the Bible, the view of Jesus as a human being and moral leader, as a prophet to be revered through the ages. It also promoted a belief in both reason and faith in religion. Our sisters and brothers in Transylvania have held on to this view for over 400 years through the worst kind of persecution. We are to hold them in honor for their courage and strong faith through great trials and tribulations.

Even with our differences, there is much these churches can give us:

1. They are models of courage. The Unitarian and Reformed ministers were leaders in the overthrow of the government.
2. They connect us with a past that we have often overlooked or forgotten.
3. They articulate a theology that is connected to both the 21<sup>st</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.
4. They remind us that freedom is a precious right in every era and in every place. It is to be fought for and persevered. If we do not help others find freedom, we may some day have to fight for it ourselves. It all begins with acceptance and tolerance of our differences. The Edict of Toleration continues to be a symbol of acceptance and tolerance of differences.
5. We can also learn from the people of Transylvania how to live closer to nature and take care of our environment. They can teach us that there is no place as “away.” We keep trying to throw things away. There is no such place. Everything must go some place. The faster we learn this the longer our environment will live. The Transylvanians know this and we can learn it from them. It is difficult to find a trash can in a Transylvania home.
6. Finally, they link us with the people of Europe, our forefathers and mothers. As the world gets smaller and smaller we should not isolate ourselves from the other people of the world, but we should look for connections between us. Through our relationships with the people of Transylvania, and the conflicts between the Romanians and the Hungarians, we can better understand the conflicts in other countries in Europe.

I want to emphasize the importance of our partner relationships. As Barbara has indicated, in India, in Transylvania and other partnerships around the world it is the relationships that are most important. Yes, aid has been important as well. There has been much money that has crossed from America to Transylvania, also to India and the Philippines. I remember when we first started our partnership in Raleigh, NC. We gave \$5,000 and it helped to completely renovate their church. It equated to over \$100,000 in their currency. We also paid the salary of the minister, and provided food and clothing for many villagers. Then we helped pay for the education of their children, something they value tremendously. Through the partnerships, tractors have been purchased, businesses have been started. Medical supplies have been purchased. The list goes on and on. I still conclude that the most important part of the partnership is the relationships that have developed.

I remember my first visit to Transylvania. We met a man on the train who delivering drugs to his brother who was a doctor in Kolozsvár, the capital city of Transylvania. Before I arrived at the Unitarian School and the Headquarters for the Unitarian Church, I was told that the ministers may be shy and reserved. I was taken to the Bishop’s office. He immediately opened up to me about his wife who had just died months earlier. My preconceived notions were challenged. He introduced me to the head of the school. The bishop died later that year and the professor became the bishop. The next year the new bishop died. I wondered, maybe I should stay away from the Bishops. I continued to keep in touch with the school and the ministers in Transylvania. I think of the minister of my first Partner Church and his family often.

My daughter, Cara, when she was in high school, began corresponding with the daughter of the minister of our Partner Church, Viola. Cara is now in her mid-thirties and they still correspond. They have visited each other, sent graduation gifts, and will be friends for life. When the village was traumatized by floods several years ago, Cara helped raise funds for the community. She became the chair of her Partner Church Committee in Raleigh.

I see the Partnership as broader than two churches. It is a connection between two cultures. When you visit Transylvania you see a country which has been a crossroads of many cultures. Many people there speak Romanian, Hungarian, German, Russian, and now English. I remember my first visit, we met so many different people. We witnessed the problems between the Romanians and the Hungarians, but we also saw Hungarians

married to Romanians. We met a government official who was a former communist who welcomed us into his office.

When you go to Transylvania you learn about the challenges the people face there, but you also see a church struggling with their traditions. In our Partner church the men run the church. They sit on one side, and the women and children sit on the other. When they welcome you into their homes, the men sit in the dining room while the women go into the kitchen and prepare the food.

The first visitor from the church in Raleigh was an ardent feminist, Linda Johnston. Linda witnessed this for several days and then finally said, "Margaret, please come join us." She looked over at the host. The hair was standing up on his neck. The minister said to Linda, "Don't touch this one." Two years later, I sat in that same room, and Margaret came in and sat down with us. I looked at the host. He smiled. Later, one of the men talked about the changing traditions caused by their contact with America. In Hungary the men, women and children all sit together.

When we develop a partnership we learn about the importance of the Unitarian religion to these people. It is the center of their lives. During the communist control, they were not able to take care of their church buildings. Many were in bad repair.

I will never forget seeing the church members when they completed the renovation. I remember reading the words of Dedication after the church was renovated. The building was finished. It was beautiful. They were so proud of what they had accomplished. Then they learned that their pews on dirt floors had termites. The Americans who were with us wanted to buy new pews and they did. I stood on these termite infested pews and read the words of a former Hungarian Bishop who encouraged them in their times of trial. We then sang the Hungarian National Anthem. I looked out and saw the tears in their eyes. I found myself crying with them.

I then remembered my first visit to Transylvania when I left the minister of our Partner Church, Sandor Varga, and his wife and daughter, Edit and Viola. As I left them and walked to the bus, I saw Edit crying. As I rode the bus I tried to understand her tears. Were they tears of joy or sadness? Was she thankful for our new friendship? Or was she crying for the life that she lives, the poverty around her, the struggles of her people? I do not know. Maybe it was all of the above.

On my second visit to Transylvania, I wanted to meet with the students at the Unitarian school in Kolozsvár. I contacted a professor and told him I was chair of the International UU Funding Panel, and would like to have a conversation with the Unitarian students studying for the ministry. He said they are in the midst of classes and exams. He didn't know how many would come to a dinner with me. Every student came. They wanted to talk about their hopes and dreams for the future.

One of the questions I had for them was: "I know most of the young people are moving to the cities. They are leaving their villages to find jobs. How important is support for the churches in the small villages? Should our funds go into the cities, the schools, to the Bishop and his programs?" Their response: "The small villages are the life blood of our families. When people retire from the city with little or no pension, they go back to the hometowns and they are welcomed there. Support for these churches is vitally important."

I also learned from the students of their interest in progressive theologies. They wanted to learn about Emerson and Parker, about Humanism and Feminist and Eco-theology. They wanted American professors to come and teach in their school, not just for a day, but for longer. They appreciate the opportunity for some of their students to come to America and study at Starr King, Harvard and Meadville Lombard.

I recalled that the first gift given to the Unitarian Bishop was a copy of my doctoral thesis in which I outlined the changing views of God in Unitarian Universalist history. I wondered if any of the students had read it.

## **Conclusion**

I will close with the most important thing I have learned about the Transylvanian people. They are the most hospitable people in the world. They will give you the last food that they have to welcome you into their home. They fulfill the Old Testament belief that we should welcome the stranger. Jesus of Nazareth looked back on this belief and said, "I was a stranger and you took me in." (Mt. 25:35)

I have learned about hospitality from the Transylvania Unitarians. Hospitality does not mean inviting people into your home to change them, but to offer a space where the stranger can become a friend. It is our task as religious people to reach out to those who are different from us and welcome them. We are to reach out to those who have been our enemy and make them our friend. This is the challenge of the Transylvania Unitarians with their Romanian neighbors. It is our challenge in our culture to do the same.

One of the goals of the Partner Church program is to create an environment of hospitality, much like the exchange programs around the world. Hospitality is a two-way street. It is giving and receiving. It is welcoming, sharing part of ourselves, but learning about the lives of others. I hope you all will consider the Partnerships that have been developed in this church. I hope you will consider attending the meeting the end of this month about the Partnership in India. I hope others will consider working with the Partnership in Transylvania. Thank you.

**Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church – Unitarian Universalist  
Association Sunday  
The Unitarian Universalist Partner Church Council  
Barbara Beach  
October 4, 2009**

One of things I love about Morris Hudgins is his “easy assignments.” He said, Barbara, you were a founding member of the Unitarian Universalist Partner Church Council (PCC), its president, you’re on the board. Do this, will you? Give us the philosophy of the PCC. Tell us what we can do for our partners, and what they do for us. Oh yes, and can you do that in about 4-5 minutes? Ah, easy for you, Leonardo!

OK. Here goes.

The philosophy is easy. The purpose of the UUPCC is to establish global citizenship as a common commitment of liberal religion—transforming ourselves and our congregations, and thus making international engagement a moral and spiritual principle of UU congregational life.

Well, how do we do that? The UUPCC connects US and Canadian congregations with partners around the world. And we create transformational opportunities for pilgrimage, hospitality, learning, and service. Our members here and abroad work together to promote international awareness, human rights, and a better world. The PCC CONNECTS with us, right here in Charlottesville, through partners in NE India and Transylvania.

Once in a PCC board meeting—you know how UUs love to ask embarrassing and difficult questions—one person asked, “What is the most radical thing we can do?” The answer—after a lot of discussion of course—was “The most radical thing we can do is to introduce people to one another.”

Why is this radical? Because when one person is introduced to someone she or he has not met before, that person becomes vulnerable to hearing something, discovering something for which he or she is not prepared, and needing to pull that “something” inside. Do that, and you are beginning to be a changed person.

Why is this radicalism part of the UUPCC philosophy? (1) Because radical openness is a leap of faith even UUs can handle; (2) Because it requires that we challenge our fear of strangers, that we challenge our assumptions—especially our cultural assumptions—through direct personal and congregational experience. (3) Because openness to strangers can move us from hello, to friendship, to partnership; and finally (4) Because by knowing the other on deeper and deeper levels, we find new and surprising ways to help them, and they, us.

In the international arena radical introductions leading to friendship and partnership make sense. Why? The hand extended to shake. The arms wrapping around to hug—these are different from the hand reaching out to give a check. Every organization needs both, but the PCC says, “I want to **know** you.”

Partnership—in families, communities, in the international community—enables us to live our commitment one person, one partnership at a time. In this church,

- I believe we live this principle by learning from each other;
- I believe we live this principle by learning from our partners;
- I believe we CAN change the world—in tiny ways, perhaps—that can help move people to reach the goals they set for themselves, in India and in Transylvania—goals that build trust, sustain their religious identity, and lift their communities; We do this in many ways, most importantly, through Community Capacity Building, and
- I believe we can feel the rumble, the excitement within us, when our hearts and minds tell us we are not what we were. We too are changed.

That's the WIFME. The "what's in it for me."

- It feels good to be part of Global Partnership at the Thomas Jefferson Memorial UU Church;
- It makes us proud to tell the world;
- It makes our community more appealing and accessible to friends right here in Charlottesville, friends from other cultures and traditions—because together we will do a better job of connecting to and leading in the global arena.
- The world has changed. WE MUST DO THIS.

Peter Senge says, "Leadership is not about position or formal authority, but [it is] about the ability to cultivate people's collective capacity to share the futures they truly desire." (repeat this)

Partnership builds that collective capacity—in us and in our partners. It is an endeavor filled with enormous risk. It is also filled with the potential for enormous rewards. As Kahil Gibran wrote, "All work is empty save where there is love." The PCC challenges us to build partnership in love, knowing we are vulnerable, knowing we are not alone, knowing that we can help build world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

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