

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE BRETHREN ASSEMBLIES OF HUNGARY

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The first Brethren assemblies in Hungary developed at the beginning of the twentieth century. They had very different starting points and began independently of one another. Later they discovered each other and established contact. The common soil was pietistic thought.

In the institutional national Reformed Church (the state Church)—even when the preaching was true to Scripture—there was no spiritual fellowship among born-again Christians, and there was little possibility of practising a biblical Christian life. Because of that, right at the end of the nineteenth century, some house fellowships were established. Believers read the Scriptures together, studied them, prayed together, and sometimes also invited friends, who themselves also after a time were converted. All this happened in living rooms and the brothers and sisters remained linked to the Church. On Sundays, they worshipped the Lord in the state Church and afterwards sought fellowship together. At the beginning of the twentieth century, before the First World War, several house-fellowships had been established. On the basis of Bible study, they noticed that the worship of the Church and also the whole institution of the Church had nothing to do with biblical Christian church-life at the beginning. Because of that, some fellowships completely separated themselves from the Church, to strive for a biblical fellowship life. When, because of the number of attenders at their meetings, they could not carry on in a room, the fellowships remaining true to the Church established separate Christian associations. The Church tolerated them between the two world wars. With the advent of Communism after the Second World War in 1949, these Christian associations were dissolved by the state and their meetings forbidden. In what follows, however, I should like to set out the history of some of the

1. Translated from the German original by Neil Summerton and Annette Nickel.

independent house-fellowships which later became Brethren assemblies.

Budapest

Before the First World War, a young doctor, Gustav Schimmert, was converted. Later, he established a home Bible study group independent from the Church. In this house group, several people were converted, including a hatmaker. He had a large house, as a result of which the growing church held its meetings there. Another young medical assistant from the Budapest Medical University, Dr Ferenc Kiss, came to the Lord in the year 1919. In his youth, he had often attended the meetings of a pietist house-fellowship. His parents were believers and the meeting often took place in their house. This fellowship remained faithful to the Reformed Church. After his conversion, Kiss linked up with a Christian association loyal to the Church, where he found fellowship with believing brothers and sisters. Through his study of scripture, he noticed that the infant baptism practised by the Church had nothing to do with the believer's baptism of the Bible. He also expressed his opinion often in his fellowship. Finally, in 1922, Dr Kiss was ordered by the leadership of the fellowship publicly to withdraw his opinion on baptism within one month. If he refused to do so, none of them would have further fellowship with him. Brother Kiss responded that he would not need eight minutes for thought to abandon his biblical view. He got up and there and then left the fellowship and the Reformed Church. But Brother Kiss very much needed fellowship with believing brothers and sisters and felt very lonely.

Because of that he turned to Dr Gustav Schimmert as adviser. Brother Schimmert invited him to the meetings of his house-church, without pressing brother Kiss to link himself with this church. After a short while, a problem arose in this little church. A son of the hatmaker lived in sexual sin and did not want to give up this life-style in spite of severe warnings. The father was not able to influence his son. Brother Schimmert's view was that this house had become unsuitable for the meetings to go on being held there. When brother Kiss heard about the matter, it became clear to him that this little

church had scriptural principles. He linked himself to the church and offered his office at the Medical University for the meetings of the church. After this spiritual cleansing of the church, the Lord added to it daily those who were intended to be saved. In this church, even Jews recognised their Messiah in the Lord Jesus Christ and were added to the church. So this little fellowship became a biblical church.

By chance on the chain bridge in Budapest, brother Kiss had met G.H. Lang, a British itinerant teacher from the west of England, who sought some information from him. Lang was in Budapest on his way from Egypt to Germany and Scotland. To brother Kiss's question as to who financed this journey for Lang, he received the answer that Lang was making this trip by faith. Soon, it became clear that Lang was a born-again brother in Christ. Brother Kiss invited him to the assembly, where Lang preached on several days. This event was in the year 1924. After several days, brother Lang said goodbye to the church, as he was obliged to be in the Bible school at Wiedenest in north-west Germany to speak at a conference. He warmly invited brother Kiss and his wife to go with him. So in 1924, brother Kiss took part in a conference at Wiedenest. After the conference, brother Lang went on to Scotland and took brother Kiss with him. (His wife remained in Wiedenest.) In Scotland, brother Kiss became familiar with many Brethren assemblies, ministering brethren and missionaries. W.E. Vine and his biblical interpretation impressed him a great deal. On the way home, he visited Wiedenest again to collect his wife. At that time, he was baptised at Wiedenest in the small river Dörspe. At the Bible School he met two Hungarian brethren, by the names of Johannes Laub and Gaspar Sterner, who were taking a two-year Bible School course there. Both came from a small village church in South Trans-Danubia. This trip convinced brother Kiss that the so-called Brethren churches were, worldwide, the group which in greatest measure resembled the biblical church. Through this trip, brother Kiss became conscious that the right course for the small independent Budapest fellowship was to become a Brethren assembly. Brother Kiss soon became a responsible brother in the Budapest church. He also sought contact with other churches in

Hungary which were independent of the Reformed Church and led them to the approach of Brethren assemblies. He also introduced the Brethren idea in his home fellowship in the small town of Nagyszalonta, a small town in Transylvania² which had been ceded to Romania by Hungary in 1919. This fellowship in several years also translated itself into an independent Brethren assembly. At the initiative of this church, several Hungarian assemblies were brought into existence in the Transylvania which still exist today. In 1929 Dr Ferenc Kiss was installed in the chair of teaching Professor in the Medical University in Szegedin. After several years, Professor Kiss was invited to the Chair in the Anatomical Institute in the Medical University of Budapest.

Further growth

Bikal. Bikal is a small village in south Trans-Danubia with a so-called Danube-Swabian population. Many German-speaking inhabitants did not understand Hungarian at all. In the 1920s, Johannes Warns, a German Brethren missionary who travelled widely in eastern Europe, made mission trips to Romania. Because of the length of the journey, he normally stopped for rest in Hungary. He took some days' break in the village of Bikal. There, there was also a small assembly. I can write nothing about how this assembly came into being. This church does not exist today. The former church members are all with the Lord. My researches into the origin of this church have had no result. My suspicion is that this church was established through the work of Johannes Warns. I have heard how Johannes Warns was accompanied on his trips to Romania by his son, Karl Warns. On the trips, he kept a diary which is preserved in the Archives of the Bible School in Wiedenest. I was able to establish as the outcome of my research that in 1923 Erich Sauer, the Wiedenest principal, during a mission trip to Romania also stopped over in Bikal. This gave Sauer the chance to preach the gospel in the church, which was already in existence. By chance, an unbelieving young man named Gaspar Sterner was present. He was spoken to from God's word, he was converted and

2. Translators' note: German - Siebenbürgen.

gave his life to the Lord. Erich Sauer invited this young man, and another brother from the church named Johannes Laub, to take a two-year Bible School course at Wiedenest. The Hungarian brothers completed the Wiedenest courses in 1924-25. In this way also, the two brothers got to know in Wiedenest the Hungarian professor of medicine, Ferenc Kiss. From that time, contact was established with the church in Budapest. Johannes Laub became the leader of the church in Bikal. But the assembly does not exist today at all. In the middle of the twentieth century, brother Laub became a Baptist pastor and he led the church across to the Baptists. The next generation grew up as Baptists and the older generation was called home to the Lord. After his trip to Wiedenest, Professor Kiss visited the small fellowships and churches, so he also visited the church in Bikal.

Debrecen. In 1927, several young members of the Reformed Church were converted and noticed through their Bible reading that not everything practised in the Church was biblical. Twelve young brothers and sisters met together in a house for worship. They were arrested by the police and were locked up in prison for several months, under the accusation of unauthorised meeting, of proclaiming the word without a theological degree, of word-for-word observance of scripture, the practice of adult baptism, and breaking bread without the presence of a priest. When Professor Kiss was informed about it, he made representations to the Interior Minister and the group was set free. The leader of the group was a young doctor named János Varjas. He became ill in prison and not long after they were freed he was called home to the Lord. The church grew nevertheless and after the Second World War the number of attenders at the meeting was about 100. In 1967, the thought and practices of the Charismatic movement were propagated in the church. As a result, several level-headed members left the church and established a new church in a house. This church grew and today about sixty people come together in the meetings.

Miskolc. Piroska Varjas, the sister of János Varjas, received the Lord Jesus into her heart in Debrecen. She was a pharmacist and worked in a pharmacy at Miskolc. There, she spoke about the Lord Jesus with Anni Roth, a Jewish photographer. Anni Roth was

converted and in 1930 created a Bible study group in her photographic studio. Initially, she invited four or five friends for the Bible study. From this small group, a large church emerged, which became the second largest assembly in Hungary. When the brothers in Budapest heard about the establishment of the assembly in Miskolc, many preachers visited the new church and helped to evangelise the area. Thus, many village churches were established in the area of Miskolc.

Nyíregyháza. Before the First World War, in 1908-10, an intense awakening arose within the framework of the Lutheran Church in north-east Hungary. The born-again Christians sought fellowship. That was not possible within the Lutheran Church. The unconverted Church members despised and mistrusted the converted Christians. So the Christians established house-fellowships or Christian associations. In 1911, a Methodist Minister, named Jozsef Rohacsek, came to Nyíregyháza on behalf of the South East Europe Mission. He preached the gospel and gathered the born-again homeless Christians into churches. So a large Methodist church was established in the town. This became the biggest Methodist church in Hungary. But several house-fellowships remained independent (of the Church and also of the Methodists). Brother Professor Kiss visited these groups and looked after brothers from the assemblies in Budapest, Miskolc and Debrecen. In 1926, after Gaspar Sterner had finished his Bible School studies in Wiedenest, he was asked by brother Professor Kiss to move from Bikal to Nyíregyháza to look after the house church. Brother Sterner followed the advice of the professor, moved to Nyíregyháza, became a Bible colporteur for the Bible Society and a responsible ministering brother in the house church there. Through his work, this church became a Brethren assembly and grew permanently. During the Second World War brother Sterner was called up as a soldier and taken into Soviet captivity as a prisoner of war. His service was missed. The other brothers had less spiritual gifts for responsibility in the church and the church suffered. In addition, the Brethren assemblies were no more than tolerated under the Hungarian government of that time, so that only adult people were allowed to participate in the meetings.

The Brethren assemblies were not allowed to do youth work, and so church members in Nyíregyháza sent their children to the youth work of the Methodist church. Because of that the children were integrated into the Methodist church. After the end of the war and imprisonment, brother Sterner became severely ill and, for so long as the Lord did not call him home, he was looked after in Budapest. The Brethren assembly slowly shrank and eventually closed.

Eger. For forty years, the younger son of Gaspar Sterner, János Soproni (Sterner) lived in a worldly way. He was a school-teacher. In the 1970s, after a motor-cycle accident he was converted, married a believer and moved to Eger. There he established a small Brethren assembly. The church still exists and is growing to today.

Other Budapest assemblies

Budapest 2. During and after the Second World War there was quite a widespread awakening in Hungary. During the 1930s a number of British football coaches and players had worked in Hungary, and this awakening began with the gospel preaching of a Scottish footballer, James Stuart. Many fellowships and Christian associations were established. In this way a fellowship was set up within the Reformed Church which grew strongly with the newly converted. As many as 100 brothers and sisters attended the meetings. The Church did not agree with it. Because of that, the fellowship asked the Brethren assembly in Budapest for space for its meetings. The Brethren assembly supplied the fellowship with meeting space on Sundays between 8.00 am and 9.30 am without charging rent. In that way, a close contact with the Brethren assembly came about and this church also became a Brethren assembly. The church grew and in a short time the number of members became about 100. In the 1960s, jealousy between the responsible brethren broke the church in two. The larger part of the church soon became Charismatic and still today exists as a Charismatic church. The other part of the church kept to the balanced approach of the Brethren assemblies, but because of the divorce and remarriage of one of the responsible brethren the number of members heavily decreased. Today a small church remains with about twenty members.

Budapest 3. Following his theological studies, a Lutheran cleric, Ferenc Sreter, wanted to become an evangelist rather than a church pastor. In the 1930s he evangelised country-wide. Many people became committed Christians through his work. During his evangelistic activity, he observed that converted Christians lost their biblical activism when after their decision for Christ they chose to continue their Christian life in a dead state-church. Therefore he encouraged the young converts in each place to form a biblical fellowship and in these to practise a Bible-directed church life. He also tried hard to call into life such fellowships. Later it became clear to him that the gospel was not just for Lutheran church members but was also for everybody. So his requirement for membership of a biblical fellowship was not church or denominational membership but only a genuine repentance, conversion and decision for the Lord Jesus Christ. In 1943 the bishop asked him nevertheless to accept a pastorate in a parish. He was allowed in addition to his pastoral ministry to practise his work as a travelling evangelist. When he was on his travels, he supplied pulpit-deputies for parish preaching. But he appointed people on the basis of the general priesthood of all believers who were born-again and very often gifted Christians but who had no theological degree and who would never have been appointed by the state Church.

In this parish again many came to faith. In 1949, brother Sreter established within his parish a biblical fellowship, in which only born-again Christians were allowed to be members irrespective of their church or denominational membership. The members of this fellowship tithed their income and exercised biblical church discipline. Brother Sreter endeavoured in this fellowship, where possible, to display biblical church principles to their best advantage. The official leaders of the Lutheran Church looked at these happenings more and more mistrustfully. After the Second World War, the believing bishops of the state Church were accused and removed, and were replaced by bishops who collaborated with the Communist state. The intensive life of faith in this parish was not considered good by the atheistic state nor too by the new bishops. The government wanted young people to be atheist. So in 1954 Ferenc

Sreter was put into retirement by the Church leadership. By way of response, the whole fellowship of about 100 people left the Church. This group, on the basis of the advice of Professor Kiss applied to the official state Church office to be registered as a free church. For fourteen years the church received no reply to this application. So, fully independent of the Church, the fellowship lived on for fourteen years in semi-illegality. The church received no ban on its meetings but also no authorisation. In the period of illegality the church grew further. In this difficult situation, a very good and close contact was established with Brethren assembly 1 in Budapest. Professor Kiss very often helped them. Already at the beginning, brother Sreter had allowed himself, on the basis of his biblical interpretation, to be baptised in the Plattensee. In 1968 the church was allowed to meet officially as Brethren assembly 3 in Budapest. Because of the shortage of space for church meetings on Sundays, three assemblies met in O Street. Each of these three Brethren assemblies had more than 100 participants in worship. In 1971 internal personal problems arose in the assembly. The church was split. A few leading brothers led part of the church to the Methodists. Five leading brothers with about twenty brothers and sisters and the young people remained at O Street and integrated themselves into Assembly 1. Today Assembly 3 does not exist.

Budapest 4. After the political change of 1990, several Christians had the desire to study the Bible in a house group, to have fellowship and to pray together. So in 1993 a house group was formed in south Buda. Eight brothers and sisters met together bi-weekly. The number of participants grew quickly. After several months, they wanted to meet weekly. The Acts of the Apostles was the subject of their studies. Soon, after about six months, there was the wish to break bread together. After ten months this little fellowship was meeting twice a week (on Sundays and Tuesdays). Soon the members noticed that they were becoming a biblical church. The Lord built his church. Then they grew to twenty-two members, who participated in the breaking of bread, and about twelve children. The church members let themselves be baptised in the Danube near Dömös. The house certainly became too small for them. Suitable space had such a high

rent that the little church could not afford it monthly. As a result, for the moment the meetings are at the other end of the town.

Assemblies near Budapest

Dunakeszi. Dunakeszi is a town immediately to the north of Budapest. Several young brothers from the Budapest 1 church, after the political change of 1989-90, began a mission for the Lord by starting a work to help people at risk. They established a trust and bought a house. In this house, a house fellowship was created for former prisoners, alcoholics and drug-addicts. A young married couple with their three children live in this house fellowship together with those they are looking after. The couple manage the project. The house is in Dunakeszi. Several Christians from Dunakeszi made contact with this work and established a fellowship together with the leader. Soon, too, other inhabitants of the town came, several of whom were converted. Today there is a Brethren assembly with about thirty members.

Biatorbagy. Twenty kilometres to the west of Budapest is the village Biatorbagy. In the 1930s a young man from Biatorbagy was converted and joined the Brethren church Budapest 1. Some time later further people in Biatorbagy accepted the Lord. The first convert opened his house for meetings. The church grew. Today, there are about thirty adult church members.

Pilismarót. The village of Pilismarót. lies in the bend of the Danube two kilometres away from Dömös. Brothers from the Hungarian Brethren assemblies created a Bible centre in 1972. The Bible centre bought a house in Dömös and reconstructed it as a Bible school and conference centre. The permanent co-workers in this activity live in the neighbouring village of Pilismarót. The co-workers were all members of a Brethren assembly. So they established a new church in Pilismarót. Several inhabitants of the village joined up with the church. Today there are about ten adult church-members.

Győr, Mosonmagyaróvár and Dorfgemeinschaften

Győr. In the 1930s, four young female believers read the biography of George Müller. They made the decision in faith to create an

orphanage. The Lord blessed this initiative. The orphanage functioned until the end of the 1960s, including during the severest Communist years of 1949-1956, in spite of malicious reports to the authorities by the Reformed clerics, who out of envy were very hostile to this work. The orphanage was at the same time also a spiritual centre for the Christian believers in the neighbourhood. At the end of the 1960s the orphanage was dissolved because of the Charismatic movement. One of the founders became a Charismatic and the others could not agree with that. In the orphanage the children were looked after until their fourteenth year. After that they took up an apprenticeship. The orphanage lay in a little town; the next large town was very far. Therefore, the intellectually gifted children were sent after they were fourteen-years old into a large town. A sister of the founder rented a house in Győr and lived there together with the children doing additional study and looking after them further. So in Győr they looked for the kind of fellowship where Christians wanted to live their Christian lives on the basis of the principles of George Müller. Thus several brothers and sisters gathered in a house to put into effect biblical fellowship life. The fellowship grew consistently and in the end the house became far too small. In the 1950s, the fellowship took up contact with the Brethren assembly in Budapest and consciously acted from then on as a Brethren assembly.

At the beginning of the 1980s, the assembly bought premises for its meetings where about eighty people could meet. The accommodation was very often filled. The work in the assembly was done in large part by two couples who were called home to the Lord. In addition, several brothers advocated a dangerous special teaching and because the church did not accept that, they left the church. The remaining responsible brother became ill. So this church shrank numerically.

Mosonmagyaróvár. The town lies ten kilometres from the border between Austria and Hungary. In Slovakia, a Hungarian village, named Somorja, lies close to the border with Hungary. Between the two world wars this village belonged to Hungary. There a Brethren assembly developed. I do not know in what circumstances. This church still exists today. After the Second World War, on the basis of

the Beneš Decree of the Czechoslovakian government, many Hungarian people were banished from Slovakia. So, as well, a brother in the assembly, named Sándor Dicsöfi was obliged to lose his home. He rowed across the Danube in a boat and settled himself in Mosonmagyaróvár. In the town he opened a pharmacy. He was skilled in drawing. So he drew several copies of works by the famous American Christian cartoonist E.J. Pace (1880-1946) and displayed them in the shop-window of his pharmacy. Each day he displayed another drawing of another biblical truth. Several people came in and made inquiries. He invited them for Bible studies in his house. Very soon, this group developed into a church. The church had about sixty members. Many of the church members were Reformed or Evangelical church members. Both churches' clergy were not believers. They were happy that somebody looked after the church members, so that they had few worries. Brother Dicsöfi was often invited by the Lutheran pastor to lead the Bible hour in the Church. In the 1970s, the old clergy were retired and new young believing pastors arrived, who tempted their church members back to the Church, so that the Brethren assembly shrank. After the Lord called brother Dicsöfi home in the 1980s, then the Brethren assembly in Mosonmagyaróvár ceased.

Dorfgemeinschaften (Village fellowships). A shoe manufacturer, named Sándor Egri, was converted and became a Baptist. Later through contact with Brethren assemblies he accepted the teaching of the Brethren. He travelled about in the country and spread the gospel. Several village folk were converted through his work and formed fellowships. These fellowships comprised mostly sisters. Perhaps there was one brother in the fellowship but often without the gift of church leadership. Today there are about three fellowships in which there are brothers with skill in ministry. In the other five or six, there is no ministering brother.