ON BEING
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When our forefathers immigrated to the United States of America around the turn of the century, wherever they settled, they soon organized Hungarian Reformed Churches. The Lord was gracious to them and to their children because these churches became viable communities of faith in the American society and are such until today.

**OUR NAME**

We call ourselves Hungarian Reformed. We are “Calvinists” after the great reformer, John Calvin (1509-1664) of Geneva, Switzerland whose teachings and interpretation of the Holy Bible influenced all the Reformed and Presbyterian churches of the world. Today, there are about sixty million Reformed or Presbyterian Christians in the world, living on five continents. They are members of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (Presbyterian and Congregationalist), with headquarters in Geneva.

But we also call ourselves Hungarian (Magyar) Reformed. It refers to our fourhundred-fifty year old spiritual and cultural heritage, which our forefathers transplanted into American life, a heritage, which was the basis of church life in the New World, and gave us a living and viable tradition that is still developing today. Presently, there are approximately 3 million Hungarian Reformed Christians in the world.

**OUR TRADITION**

What is our Hungarian Reformed tradition?

It has various features such as the use of the Bible, the Psalter and prayer books in private and family worship.

From Reformation times the Hungarian Reformed Church developed and maintained a school system from elementary to college level.

Since the Reformation era (sixteenth century), Hungarian Reformed church life has been Holy Communion-centered, which is indeed, the heart of our tradition.
At least six times a year Holy Communion is celebrated in the Old World, as well as in North America: Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, New Bread and New Wine. Four communion services are linked with the liturgical church-year: Christmas, Lent, Easter and Pentecost. Communion for the New Bread and for the New Wine are actually taken from the cycle of the secular year, still very important in an agricultural society from which the Old Country churches emerged. Communion for the New Bread is celebrated after the harvest as a thanksgiving for God's blessings upon the labors of the farmer; Communion for the New Wine is celebrated in the fall upon the completion of the grape harvest. In some congregations in North America, World-Wide Communion took the place of the Communion for New Wine, in others it was adopted as a seventh occasion for Holy Communion.

Our Holy Communion service consists of
- the Words of Institution,
- meditation,
- prayer of confession,
- the Apostles' Creed,
- the four communion questions,
- distribution of the holy elements,
- post-communion exhortation,
- prayer of thanksgiving,
- the Lord's Prayer,
- and the benediction.

The communion questions and answers are actually a brief summary of the Christian faith. It is an affirmation of faith on the part of the communicants, giving them the privilege to be admitted to the Lord's Table. The holy elements are received by the faithful not in the pews, but in front of the Table, from the hands of the minister. During Communion, the congregation always sings communion-hymns.

**OUR CONFESSIONS**

All Hungarian Reformed churches recognize the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the Word of God and the ultimate rule of the Christian faith and practice.
The first complete edition of the Bible was published in 1590 (Vizsoly Bible). The translation by Gáspár Károly became the main instrument of the development of modern Hungarian language.

In their doctrinal interpretation, they are guided by the Second Helvetic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism, with the liberty of conscience inherent in the Gospel.

Both the Second Helvetic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism are classic statements of evangelical faith written in the century of the Reformation. They have been the confessional books of the Hungarian Reformed churches ever since. A 20th century modern translation of the Heidelberg Catechism was prepared by a special committee of the North America Area of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches for the 400th anniversary of the Catechism in 1963. A Hungarian Reformed representative served on this committee. The 400th anniversary of the Second Helvetic Confession was commemorated by the publication, in 1968, of that document and the Heidelberg Catechism in one volume under the title, *Creeds of Hungarian Reformed Christianity*, available at the Bethlen Home, Ligonier, Pennsylvania.

Our preaching and teaching ministry, Christian education and confirmation instruction, church life and personal piety are shaped by the spirit of these two classic confessional books.

**OUR FORM OF CHURCH GOVERNMENT**

The traditional Hungarian Reformed form of church government unites the tenets of Episcopal, Presbyterian and Congregational structures. Since Reformation times there have been bishops, elected heads of Synods, and seniors, elected heads of Classes. Bishops in Hungary are elected for life, but the bishops of the American Hungarian church bodies are elected for a stated term of office.

The office of bishop has been established in two American church bodies, the Hungarian Reformed Church in America, and the Calvin Synod of the United Church of Christ. These bishops are the “heads” of their respective bodies (as American ecumenical parlance goes) with administrative duties to perform
without jurisdictional power. The administrative heads of the Classes, called seniors in Hungary, use the name “dean” in America.

The Hungarian form of church government has another distinctive feature in addition to the office of bishop.

It calls for equal lay leadership on all levels of church structure. In the local congregation there is a “chief elder” or “lay president.” In the classis, there is also a “chief elder of the classis.” In the Hungarian Reformed Church in America he serves as equal partner in presiding at classis meetings, so does the “chief elder of the synod” serve with the bishop. In other denominations the role of the lay partner is of less authority. In the Calvin Synod there is no chief elder of the synod, although a lay person is member of the synod’s executive council. In the HRCA all officers are ultimately elected by the church councils, in the Calvin Synod the synodical meeting elects the bishop and other officers, the classes do the same on classis level.

A SINGING CHURCH

Hungarian Reformed congregations love to sing the Geneva Psalms. Members know many of them by heart and sing them powerfully. Many visitors are touched by the singing of these hymns of the Reformation. In 1946, the American Hungarian Reformed Ministerial Association published an American Hungarian Reformed Hymnal (Énekeskönyv) in the Hungarian language, which is a standard hymnbook of our congregations. It is fairly representative of our heritage, although the tremendous renewal of Hungarian music inspired by Zoltán Kodály, who used the Geneva Psalms and the hymns of the Hungarian Reformation in many of his compositions, had not as yet influenced the editors of this hymnbook.

It remains a task of the future to perpetuate the rich heritage of Hungarian Reformed church music in proper English translations.

HISTORICAL NOTES

When the Calvinist Puritans colonized New England and built their society and culture in accordance with the principles
of the Calvinist Reformation, in Transylvania (Erdély), the Hungarian Reformed statesman, Gábor Bethlen (1580-1629) and his successors attempted the same. For fifty years they succeeded to preserve the independence of Transylvania upon the same principles as the Puritans of New England. While the spirit of New England prevailed, and ultimately the United States of America came into being, the independence of Transylvania was crushed by the cruel events of history. But while it lasted, the spirit of Transylvania has been the spirit of liberty from the time when, in 1564, the Diet of Torda declared for the first time in history religious freedom for the Reformed Church together with that of other Christian churches.

It should also be noted that Reformed Churches in present Slovakia (Eastern part of Czechoslovakia), Transylvania (North-Western part of Romania), the Carpatho-Ukraine (U.S.S.R.), and Yugoslavia are all Hungarian Reformed churches both in structure and in language. These are situated in areas which used to be parts of Hungary before the end of World War I.

THE PRESENT

Our Hungarian Reformed churches in North America are affiliated with several church bodies. There is the Hungarian Reformed Church in America, a fully independent denomination, established in 1924 by self-supporting congregations which did not wish to be affiliated with any American denomination; the Calvin Synod, a self-governing body (conference) of the United Church of Christ consisting of congregations which in 1921 accepted the Agreement of Tiffin between the Reformed Church in Hungary and the Reformed Church in the U.S. transferring their membership to the latter (the Reformed Church in the U.S. was one of the parent bodies of the United Church of Christ); Hungarian Reformed churches belonging to geographical conferences of the UCC; congregations belonging to the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. Two churches are affiliated with the Reformed Church in America, and one with the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. The Hungarian Reformed churches in Canada are members of the Presbyterian Church of Canada, or of the United Church of Canada, two congregations belong to the Hungarian Reformed Church in America.
Although these congregations observe the discipline and participate in the denominational activities of their respective judicatories, their church life is characteristic of the Hungarian Reformed spirit of independence, most of them have a distinctive congregationalist flavor.

Yet there is a significant interdenominational cooperation among them. The Hymnal already referred to is being used in all congregations. At the Hungarian services, the order and the liturgical texts of the sacraments and other ordinances (confirmation, wedding, burial) are the same in all the congregations. The English services, in some cases, do contain elements of the respective American denominations but still keep most of the Hungarian texts translated into English.

We have common institutions: the American Hungarian Presbyterians' Association, the American Hungarian Reformed Ministerial Association. The Hungarian Reformed Federation of America is a fraternal insurance and mutual aid society. The Bethlen Home in Ligonier, Pennsylvania is jointly supported by all Hungarian Reformed Churches in the U.S.A. and Canada.

Other areas of cooperation include the joint Youth Conferences since 1979, support of sister churches in the Old Country and the diaspora on five continents. The desire to unite the fragmented bodies of North American Hungarian Reformed Christianity recurs from time to time.

Our churches served the cause of the preservation of Hungarian language and culture from the 1890s and continue to do so.

Today, our Hungarian Reformed churches in North America maintain and preserve many cultural and social traditions, which are integral parts of our church life, and attempt to make it relevant to our society and in our time.

It has been noted by scholars, that the Daily Vacation Bible Schools were originally inspired by the Summer Hungarian Church Schools of the first Hungarian immigrants, who began those summer vacation schools before the turn of the century to teach their children their faith and their cultural heritage.

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To remain faithful to this tradition will continue to enrich American church and community life as we share it with clarity of faith, sacrifice of service and loyalty to our ethnic and religious heritage.