

SYNOD SUBMISSION OF THE CHURCH REVISION COMMITTEE

With the thematic (extraordinary) session of the Synod of RCH held on 28 September 2011 in Balatonszárszó, and the subsequent foundation and commission of the Church Revision Committee (CRC), the superior executive body of our church has expressed its intention (Synod resolution Zs-167/2011.11.18) to evaluate the activities of our church over the last two decades, the altered social framework of conditions as well as both the formal and substantial changes in our service in obeying the Lord of our church, on a firm Biblical and confessional basis, and to discern the ways to proceed accordingly. Our church, our congregations and institutions do not wish to be passively drifted along by socio-political and economic changes. Instead, they would like to act *strategically*, while at the same time *calling for* the church-creating and renewing power of the Holy Spirit, overcoming the feeling of helplessness and resigned fear, and expressing the hope that our church is meant to grow (both in terms of quality and quantity). When *expressing our thankfulness* for the opportunities and achievements of church service so far, we must not engage in the sins of self-complacency and self-justification and ignore real problems or downplay the severity of the current crisis.

BACKGROUND

CRC started its activities with a view to the above facts. The committee was set up during the November session of the Synod last year, and was mandated to process the issues and problems raised during the thematic assembly in Balatonszárszó, and to take the results further. The specific task for the committee was the following: developing theoretical and practical proposals for the Synod regarding questions of the direction and guidelines of church activities, church organization, financing, church discipline, as well as issues of liturgy and worship, all on the basis of the working plan of the 13th Synod and the issues raised during the thematic Synod session.

Ex officio members of CRC are the chairpersons of the six standing Synod committees: Zoltán Bellai, chairperson of the Finance Committee, Dr. Sándor Fazakas, chairperson of the Theology Committee, Imre Hörcsök, chairperson of the Education Committee, Lajos Püski, chairperson of the Mission Committee, László Szalai, chairperson of the Communication Committee and Zsigmond Vad, chairperson of the Foreign Relations and Ecumenical Committee. The Synod Council appointed nine additional members on 22 February 2012. They are: Rev. Ildikó Berecky, pastor in Harkány; Dr. Dénes Dienes, archives director, professor and department head in Sárospatak; Dr. Sándor Enghy, professor; Rev. Dr. András Lovas, pastor in Budapest-Gazdagrét; Dr. László Módis medical university professor; Dr. Gyula Patkó, rector of Miskolc University; Dr. Péter Varga, lawyer; Rev. Dr. András Harmathy, pastor in Szigetszentmiklós and Ilona Tőkéczi, elder in Miskolc, professor and sociologist at the Cistibiscan Reformed Church District.

OVERVIEW OF THE PAST ACTIVITIES OF THE CRC

During the first meeting, held on 11 April, participants introduced themselves, reviewed the tasks and work schedule of the committee, and elected the convener of the committee: Rev. Dr. András Harmathy, pastor in Szigetszentmiklós.

The second meeting of CRC took place on 12 June. Among other issues, members discussed the theological premise of the committee's work, acquainted themselves with the similar reform processes of foreign partner churches and the ways such processes have been developed. The committee also began to formulate the timetable for its work. The theological reflection on the church was initially based on the examination of the image of the church in the Ecumenical dialogue, as well as the comments and views of members. One of the most prominent topics was the concept of the missionary church, especially the features that are in line with our creeds. *"The church living in its congregations and the congregations living within the church: as instruments in God's mission."* However, the Committee was in agreement that the actual work should take a practical approach, as the church and the congregations are facing grave challenges.

“The main question is whether we believe in the power of the Gospel” – “We have been brought together by misery.” These two sentences summarize the basic dilemma that arose during the next meeting of CRC, held on location in Kecskemét on 18 September. At this meeting, the committee determined the fundamental theological elements of the vision of the church, and drafted a schedule that would be included in the submission to be presented at the Synod session coming up in November. The submission, apart from the vision regarding the church’s mission, also contains the priority areas of the church’s service, as well as the specifications of urgent organizational issues, which would form an integral part of the widespread but well-defined and coordinated dialogue to be launched by the committee. CRC members agreed that there was no need for a brand new theological basis for the church vision. Instead, we should reformulate and re-confirm what has been laid down in our creeds based on the Scripture. Therefore it should be examined – on the basis of theological and empirical criteria – to what extent the current church organization of RCH serves the unchanging mission of the church: “the communication of the Gospel.”

Within the committee, several issues were discussed that had been raised either during the thematic Synod session or the subsequent national meeting of deans and curators, ranging from the question of church membership to the parochial system based on the territorial principle, and the principle of parity. For the discussion of these issues, the committee submits the following proposal to the Synod. In case it is approved by the Synod, the committee will initiate a widespread and inclusive dialogue, with the involvement of congregations, pastors, presbytery-level bodies and specific experts. Through this, the committee also wishes to clear the misconception – and deflate excessive expectations – that as an extraordinary body it would be able to solve problems that the regular bodies of our church have not been able to overcome. The dialogue – which avoids the extremes of exclusively vision or problem oriented – could also enhance the paradigm change which is more important than organizational questions.

CHURCH-SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH AND GOOD PRACTICES

After its second session, CRC sent a letter to the Presidium of RCH. In the letter, the committee emphasized the need for a consensus on the proposed vision on the church, and urged the escalation of the church-sociological research and the widespread collection of good practices:

„Regarding the diagnosis that has been mentioned on several occasions, an urgent task for the church is to formulate a common evaluation of the situation, and carry out comprehensive sociological research in the areas where the results gained so far are not reassuring. No answers may be given responsibly in the absence of such a comprehensive diagnosis. We are committed to achieving prompt results, but we cannot take the responsibility to give ad hoc answers to acute questions and problems.”

In the letter quoted above, CRC also expressed its unanimous opinion that there was a need for a comprehensive analysis of the financial management of the church with the involvement of experts, with a particular focus on the self-sustainability of congregations and the estimation of funds available for a potential transformation or reform.

In light of the positive response from the Presidium, CRC formulated proposals regarding the sociological research, which constitutes a separate submission presented to the current session of the Synod. At the same time, CRC expects the actual work to be started parallel to the operation of the committee in the two areas already mentioned (sociological research and collecting best practices). Unless these two conditions are met, the efforts of CRC will come to nothing.

PRINCIPLES REGARDING THE PROCESS COORDINATED BY CRC

Continuity and innovation – these two concepts must define the work to be done. On the one hand, preparing for the future is inseparable from the history and traditions of the church, which form parts of the process of church life. On the other hand, with a view to new situations and conditions, we need to redefine the task that is still valid today, even with the creation of new forms, if needed.

The ability to distinguish things with a clear mind is indispensable. We must not single out one explanation for the current crisis of the church (e.g., blame it all on the incompetence of pastors, on the atheist church policy of Communist Hungary, or the *Zeitgeist* of secularism). The Reformed Church in Hungary shares the fate of European Christianity and more specifically European Protestantism, inasmuch as regarding our own data or the religious map of the region, we must face

- a. a *demographic* crisis: an undeniable fall in church membership
- b. a crisis of *faith and religious culture*: faith and religion do not play such an important role in the interpretation of life and the world as before. (This phenomenon has been present since the Age of Enlightenment.)
- c. a *financial* crisis: the fundamental conditions of operation are more and more difficult to maintain, especially with a view to the financial capacity of church members.

These three crises are closely interrelated and constitute a complex reality; still, they must be dealt with separately on the level of analyzing the situation and seeking solutions.

CHURCH VISION IN DEVELOPMENT – THEOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES

When defining the nature and mission of the church, the Reformed Church in Hungary primarily relies on the teachings of the Scripture and the confessions adopted by the RCH (the Heidelberg Catechism (Question 54) and the 2nd Helvetic Confession (Chapters 17 and 18)). Apart from these, CRC also relies on the Ecclesiology formulated as a result of the Ecumenical theological dialogue on the nature and mission of the church, as well as the vision of a “missionary” church.

The Reformed Church in Hungary is *part of the universal church of Jesus Christ*, member of Christ’s body, the community of believers. On the basis of the Scripture and the confessions, it believes that the church is brought into existence by the Word of God (*creatura verbi*): the Lord calls people who recognize in Him the final reason, basis and meaning of life, and confess this in faith. The Lord also sends and mandates the community which has obeyed His calling to spread the Gospel in a world defined by sin and death. The mission and calling of the church is to be a sign, foretaste and agent of the love of God manifested in Jesus Christ as well as of His kingdom that will become a reality one day. It achieves this through worship, teaching, diaconia and in general, through living out faith – and all that it entails – in all areas of life. On the other hand, the church confess with faith that – as it is concisely put by the confessions – the church, as a community of people who have been chosen and called by God, is guided and protected by Christ. This determines the past, present and future of the church.

As accordant teachings of the Scripture state – despite the local peculiarities of the church – it is the local congregation where people gather in the name of Jesus Christ, where the Word of God is proclaimed, where the essence of the Gospel is heard, seen and experienced.

“Ekklesia” is a Greek term, which corresponds to the Old Testament term “qahal,” which meant the gathering of God’s people before the Lord and under His rule, to listen to His law and truth. In the New Testament there are various insights and

images that express the reality of the church: the church is a spiritual house (1Peter 2:4-8) made up of living stones, whose foundation is Christ (1Chor 3:11); at the same time a holy temple for the Lord, the shelter of God, where the living stones are arranged into a spiritual house through the Spirit (Ephesians 2:22). The church is God's chosen and own people (1Peter 2:9), marching towards a well-defined goal throughout its earthly journey, but the true joyous future is still ahead of them (Hebrews 4); the church is the flock of Christ (John 10), enjoying the leadership and protection of the shepherd; it is also the bride of Christ (Revelation 21:2), characterized by waiting faithfully, and the body of Christ (Romans 12:4-8), made up of many members which operate with their own functions and gifts. What is common to all the above descriptions is that the reality of the church is impossible without Christ ("you cannot do anything without me," John 15:5). Therefore the church is only a church as long as it is the sign and tool of the mission of God for the world ("Missio Dei"). This mission is manifested in the basic services of the church: kerygma and martyria, i.e., in being ambassadors for Christ giving testimony both in words and deeds, with our whole life; koinonia, i.e., our communion with God and each other rooted in Christ; diakonia, i.e., turning with charity to our own community and to the world; as well as leiturgia, i.e., the celebration of our communion with God and each other.

Still, the church is a social phenomenon, in its *historical and social reality*, in its institutional and organizational characteristics as well as its existence as a legal entity. However, it differs from every other social organization inasmuch as it originates from the command of God, its mission is determined by the resurrected Lord, Jesus Christ, and its manifestation is a gift from the Holy Spirit. (This duality and seeming tension is expressed in our confessions as well: the church is an object of faith – I believe the Universal Christian Church –, but it is also a visible, tangible and institutional body).

Therefore – being aware of our responsibility and our limits – we wish to turn to the present form of the church and examine how the current forms of our church life, its organizational structure, the inner and outer frameworks of its service, as well as its shortcomings and crisis phenomena are put into perspective by our Biblical and theological-confessional findings.

We must ask the question whether the church – if it accepts itself as being defined by the Bible and the confessions – fulfils the mission it received from the Lord.

In order to contemplate the strategic decisions regarding the future of the church, it is worth examining the reality of the church from three different perspectives, and see how these relate to each other:

1. ***The church as object of faith:*** "I believe One Holy Universal Apostolic Church." This means that the church's origins and purpose are rooted in the Word of God, and its *attributes* (one, holy, universal, Christian) accompany the life of the church as a promise, even if they do not correspond to everyday reality. The *oneness* of the church is given in Christ; its *holiness* means that its members have been called by the Triune God to fulfil His service and form a communion with Him; it is *universal (catholic)* as it looks at itself as a member of the global Christian community; and finally it is *apostolic*, i.e., it is meant to give testimony about the truth of the Gospel. And while the given historical-sociological reality of the church falls short of these attributes to a great extent, the members of the church are allowed to testify to them and strive to achieve them, in terms of the 31st and 32nd questions of the Heidelberg Catechism, as parts of the threefold office of Christ ("munus triplex": Prophet, Priest and King): 1. learning, confessing and preaching the Word of God; 2. thanksgiving (gratitude) and

praying for the other, on the basis of intercession; 3. fighting against sin and evil with a free and good conscience, hoping for the final reign of Christ.

The *attributes* of the church, and the testimony about them make us realize that the reality of the church is more than what we can experience during our earthly lives, while at the same time they also mean a constant unsettling challenge, like holding a mirror in front of the earthly-historical, tangible reality of the church.

2. **The church as an event:** According to Matthew 18:20 and Acts 2:42, in a place where people *gather* to preach the Word and listen to the teachings of the Gospel, to pray, where they break the bread and experience a communion, “*ekklesia*” comes about. The church is a reality born in the Word of God (*creatura verbi*). The so-called “marks of the church” (*notae ecclesiae*), referred to by the fathers of Reformation, indicate the earthly manifestation, the empirical form of the church: the pure preaching of the Gospel, the proper administration of sacraments. However, the realization and existence of the church is not exclusively associated with worship events, as it was already apparent in the time of early Christianity: internal solidarity, and taking care of widows and the poor are all examples of the realization of the church (see for example Acts 2:46; 4:32-35; 6:2-7). These two facts lead to two more considerations: on the one hand, we must not forget that there can be no church where there is no congregation (a community gathered around the Word and the sacraments); on the other hand, it is dubious whether the current and known institutional forms and organizational structures reflect the reality of the church, which is expressed by the principle of “the local congregation is fully the church but not the full church.” Is there a form, framework or organization (such as specific congregational forms, worship occasions, services) – other than the current parochial organizational structure – that allows for the realization of the universal church?
3. **The church as an institution:** The external manifestation of the church, its organizational structure as well as its system of institutions have undergone a great many changes over the past centuries, and they frequently adopted lay patterns. This is the form of the church that is most apparent in both the world and society: there are members and representatives of local congregations, church buildings and estates, the pastor’s office, as well as the various church governing bodies, educational and social institutions. At this point it must be clarified how the institutional nature and organizational structure of the church relates to the first two aspects: the church as an object of faith and the local realization of the universal church. To be more precise: is the current external order and organizational structure of the church appropriate in the sense that it can efficiently support congregations in fulfilling their mission?

CONCLUSIONS

The basis of the existence and mission of the church is that the redeeming will of God has become manifested in Christ. The church, therefore, is both partaker and instrument of God’s mission. The community of the church is called to be a sign, foretaste and agent of the kingdom of God in the world, by proclaiming the Gospel in word and deed to the world through the witness of its congregations and members. The organization of the church, the structure that provides the framework for the community of congregations, must be itself an instrument and bearer of the proclamation of the Gospel (its „communication”) which creates values, identity and community.

The Church Revision Committee – on the basis of principle of the „congregation-conscious church and the church-conscious congregation” and the missionary church vision outlined above, in line with the Synod’s cycle plan and motto adopted by the Synod „Ambassadors for Christ” – proposes a dialogue to be launched with the involvement of the whole of the church, including congregations, representing bodies and experts.

THE PROPOSED METHOD OF THE DIALOGUE

In case CRC's submission is approved by the Synod, the committee will draft a discussion paper which relies on the above vision statement, with the attachment of a short methodological guideline for presbyteries, which provides ways to include congregations themselves in the dialogue. At the same time, church institutions and the responsible groups of the main services and mission branches are also involved in the discussion.

The two fundamental aims of the dialogue are to have a renewal of church vision on the basis of the above-described theological convictions, and to determine the structural forms required to achieve that vision with the careful consideration of the social reality that determines our service. Both an evaluation of the situation and the vision for the future may be formulated during the process proposed by CRC. The initiative has the advantage of coordinating the work of individual groups and workshops – which have already begun the formulation of concepts in certain areas – in a single process.

After evaluating the results of the extensive consultation, CRC will draft an action plan for the autumn 2013 session of the Synod.

1 February 2013

In the targeted dialogue coordinated by CRC, the committee will

- a) draft a discussion paper on the basis of the developing church vision and the priority issues (see below) by 1 February 2013
- b) develop a set of guidelines for presbyteries on how to involve congregations and how to implement the dialogue
- c) directly address the members of church institutions and leaders of working fields

June 30 2013

On the basis of the feedback received from congregations and institutions, CRC will draft an action plan to be submitted to the Synod during its autumn 2013 session.

After the november 2013 Synod session

Afterwards, on the basis of the vision and basic goals outlined in the action plan, the committee will initiate the adoption of the necessary resolutions at the decision-making bodies of the church.

PRIMARY ISSUES AND AREAS OF SERVICE FOR THE DIALOGUE PROPOSED AND COORDINATED BY CRC

At the meetings of the CRC, several issues were discussed that had been raised either during the thematic Synod session or the subsequent meeting of deans and curators, or suggested to the committee in other ways, ranging from the question of church membership to the parochial system and the principle of parity. It would be difficult to order these issues, work areas and suggestions by importance because they are not of the same nature: they are specific either because of the type of congregation or the area of service, and some of them pertain to the evaluation of the situation, while others to the vision itself or the stages of achieving the vision. CRC used an internal online survey to prioritize the issues, areas and questions. This list, based on importance, will determine the series of questions of the discussion paper regarding the guided dialogue, taking into consideration the peculiarities of the working fields to be addressed.

The list provided below is only a preliminary one, to be shaped further during the consultation, which – if approved by the Synod – will be launched in February 2013 by CRC with the consideration of the already existing workshops and the involvement of the Presidium.

As it has been mentioned earlier, CRC has made proposals regarding the significance and aims of the church-sociological research, and CRC supports the Synod in underlining the importance of the collection and distribution of good practices. The remarks concerning these issues do not feature in the list below.

The issues arising in the basic areas are the following, listed in order of importance:

1. issues concerning the primary service of the church, the “communication” of the Gospel:

- renewal of liturgy, worship, preaching and spirituality
- development of congregation and community building concepts, methods for enhancing evangelization and “discipleship” (revitalization)
- enhancement of a fundamental paradigm change: the promotion of mission criteria and tasks, rather than fiscal criteria for the maintenance of congregations and institutions
- acceleration in the talks on teaching faith, religious education, confirmation, curriculum (the presence of the church from the cradle to the grave)
- careful consideration of the (continuing) education of pastors on the basis of real needs
- educating people to be responsible church members, training of elders and curators
- provision of the service of religion teachers and deacons
- Roma mission: in the area marked as a priority in the Synod’s cycle plan, drafting a separate mission concept (strategy), raising awareness and launching specific programmes
- foundation of a scientific centre of theology – National Pastors’ Institute
- review of the education system concept in light of the church vision

2. Issues arising in connection with the social mission of the church, which is inseparable from the primary mission:

- communication: presenting a Reformed “profile” which is in line with the mission goals, conscious and unified PR activities
- church and society: development of a concept for the social teachings of the church, concept for involving experts
- an integrated strategy for diaconia, with a special focus on developing a separate concept for diaconia within congregations
- development of a concept for social missions, in light of the church vision

3. Key church organization and legal issues in connection with the goals set regarding the mission:

- parity, presbytery-synod system , revision of the role of lay persons, the training of elders and curators
- on the basis of the presbytery-synod system, a comprehensive revision of the current structure, which is weighed down by the burdens of the past, especially the office of the bishop and the autonomy of church districts
- proportionality in the bearing of costs, careful handling of funds, allocation of funds on the basis of needs, solidarity in all areas
- church discipline, guaranteed transparency of and cooperation between the various church organizational levels, unity
- issue of church membership
- church financing: development of alternatives to the current dependence on the state, the use of untied funds in a unified way that enhances the mission strategy
- status of congregations
- regulation of pastoral service with a special emphasis on remuneration (the financial dependence of pastors, a potential centralized salary)
- physical-mental health of pastors
- legal status of pastors
- a reliable and unified system of internal church data supply
- strengthening of the executive role of lay presidents
- review of the phenomenon of pastor-centeredness
- issue of the maintenance of buildings of historic interest
- church real estate registry
- assessment of pastor's residences, apartments and communal rooms with a view to the feasibility of the mission strategy

CRC proposes that the process should be continued with the involvement of the bodies and experts of its choice, on the basis of the above principles, vision, schedule, work method and priorities outlined in its submission.

DRAFT RESOLUTIONS:

1. The report of the Church Revision Committee is approved by the Synod.
2. The proposal (summary) on the church vision which forms part of the submission of the Church Revision Committee is adopted by the Synod as the theological principle of the further work process.
3. The Synod supports the Church Revision Committee in its endeavour to initiate and coordinate a widespread dialogue – in line with its original mandate – on the basis of the principles, vision, schedule, work method and priorities outlined in its submission, in cooperation with the bodies and experts of its choice.
4. The Synod commissions the Church Revision Committee to submit an action plan as a result of the process for the autumn 2013 session of the Synod.
5. The Synod commissions the Presidium of the Synod to take the necessary steps for providing the needed human resources for the coordination of the church wide dialogue proposed by the CRC, if necessary through the employment of a full-time employee