

TEXTS, FOR THE RECORD

*This "Open Letter," signed by 254 members of the Lutheran Church in Hungary in January 2002, was sent to the National Council of the Lutheran Church in Hungary. It reflects the life and problems of a minority Lutheran church in a post-Communist Eastern European country. This church, according to the authors, found herself in the captivity of secularism after four decades of ideological captivity. The issues raised here are not just provincial, however, but global. The letter was written by Dr. Tibor Fabiny, Jr., Professor of Literature and the Lay President of the Hungarian Luther Alliance, who adds a postscript below. It was translated into English by Richard Burian. The letter was published twice in Hungary (in 2002 in *Lelkipásztor*, a Lutheran monthly, and in 2003 in *Ökumené*, an Ecumenical Review), and has been translated into Slovak, German and Russian. This is the first publication of the letter in English.*

The Captivity of our Church Today

A Letter to the National Council of the Lutheran Church in
Hungary and all her Members (January 8, 2002)

Ezekiel 3:17

"Son of Man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel"

THE GOOD NEWS that has been entrusted to God's people has been twisted innumerable times throughout the history of mankind. This deformity is the consequence of sin, which in the language of the Bible appears under the imagery of captivity. The Reformation sprang up from the recognition that Christ's church must be led out of its Babylonian captivity.

In our Hungarian Lutheran Church, it was political manipulation that held the gospel captive during the four decades of dictatorship. False theological teachings have fettered the life of the church for decades, but God still raised brotherly and prophetic people who care.

Liberation from the pressures of fear and labeling, coercion and lies, indubitably opened up many doors for our church. Our leaders have lived with the opportunity that has been given to them by history. To God alone be the glory for all these blessings!

In the prized political freedom, however, our church has unnoticeably fallen into an even newer captivity. Our miseries today are in part our transgressions of yesterday: the bitter consequences of missed opportunities. The captivity of our church today then, is *secularism*, which is an easy way to stray from the gospel-teaching entrusted to us, and also a submission to the encircling and bewitching values of the world and ever-strengthening materialistic way of thought.

We also believe that the church must live in and affect the world, that it cannot become an anachronistic fossil. But without a strong inner conviction and dedication, this realization can result in a misunderstood and falsely interpreted modernism. The twisted fruits of this spirit have appeared in the pulpit, in conferences, in the church media, at youth-events and not lastly even in theological training. At all times moral depreciation has been the result of any digression from sound doctrine. The strictures of the church have loosened up. We confess with Luther, that deceptive teachings and the scandalous way of life that come from them are the profaning of God's name.

It fills us with deep concern that weighty misteachings find their way into the church media, otherwise so promisingly vital. For example, a secular ecclesiastical leader can repeatedly write that "divorce is not sin." It is our conviction that these and other similarly irresponsible statements simply give fuel to an unclean way of living, to faithlessness in marriage and to adultery.

It is in the footsteps of the Apostle Paul that we agree that sin is a deep reality. We know that divorce, homosexual partnership, and adultery are just individual *visible* symptoms of this reality. It is also true, that invisible sins (a failed marriage, unclean desires, jealousy, etc.) are at a similar discrepancy with God's commandments. But nobody can demand for themselves the right to deny sin, in other words, to remove the "stamp of sin" from the sinner. On the contrary, it would be even more his responsibility to preach the good news of the only freedom for sinners.

In the current situation, exceptionally great responsibilities fall onto the bishops of our church. It is with the hope of our salvation

from this captivity enslaving many of us that we confess our faith as watchmen and turn to the competent authorities of the church with the suggestions outlined below.

1. It is our conviction that all moral ruin comes from the ignorance of the knowledge and order of the true God (Rom. 1:18–32). We confess, that God's Word is the only sure measure in the formation of the judgments that anoint us the awaiters and carriers of salvation. Thus, the foundations of the teachings of our faith can only be the revealed word, which calls us in the form of the law and the gospel. Our practice of preaching has also fallen into captivity and has given in to the spirit of the age: our church's classical biblical and Lutheran traditions have been relegated into the background, and their place has been taken by fashionable individualism or a one-sided meditational tone. It gives room for deep concern that the knowledge of Scripture, especially of the Old Testament, is so deficient among the people of our church. But faith comes from the acceptance of God's Word. *This is why we suggest that our church's various committees organize faith-deepening Bible camps, and thereby make it known that the unknown and forgotten books of the Bible hold surprises and the healing good news for all generations.*
2. It is Christ who has charged the shepherds of the church to look after, to caution, and to encourage the flock. We believe that the solution is not to sweep the problems under the rug, but to name them and to heal them. *We ask that our bishops adhere to their vows, and watch over the purity of biblical teaching more determinedly than they have been doing. Let them listen to the sermons of the ministers who are under their authority. Let them take theological counselors to their sides. And should they discover that some ministers are incompatible with the biblical ministry and that they live a scandalous way of life, they should exercise their right to discipline, in order to defend the community! It is not the lack, but the very proof, of love to suspend those who abuse their office. The biblical motivation of such corrective measures will be manifested if those who have failed can recognize sin as the burden of their lives.*
3. We confess that theology is the discipline of the church, and is not just one among the secular sciences, although of course it must naturally seek connections with the secular sciences. It is well known that the theological education that had such a great tradition in Hungary fell back academically during the decades of Communism. In the face of all this, however, there were and still are outstanding and blessed teachers among us. However, we are experiencing the relegation of the faith foundations of the education of our ministers to the background in many fields. In one of the ceremonies of our Theological University it was self-assuredly stated that "The Bible *does not demand of itself the role of divine inspiration.*" We do not mean to say that we confess verbal inspiration, but it is our conviction that we cannot so easily brush aside the last two thousand years of the church's teachings on divine inspiration (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20). The signs show that our Theological University is not ready

to integrate into the church the many students who have come from secular backgrounds. We find the congregational education that is introduced only at the end of their studies to be too late for the above reasons. We see that the ministers who are just beginning their professions upon leaving seminary do not seem to have appropriated Lutheran theology as guiding their perspectives. *This is why we ask the bishop responsible for our church's Theological University to organize conferences for the larger audience of the church on the foundations of theological education, the present situation and the future expectations.* Let our theologians and church leaders organize a colloquium that evaluates the last "forty years" of theology. Our church is indebted to us on the matter of the re-evaluation of the "theology of diaconia" for one and a half decades now.

4. Let the national church media be unable to represent viewpoints and opinions that are not in accord with Scripture or Lutheran teachings. We are not advocating censorship, but that the editors of papers and the producers of broadcasts do their work on the basis of a faithful and theological view, truly in responsibility to the church. The leaders of our church should regularly meet with the editors to discuss spiritual and ecclesiastical questions. *We need to put more of an emphasis on faith-awakening and constructive sermons in our media ministry, as well as on healthy teaching and the display of a practical Christian life. The announcements of events and special occasions should only come after this.*
5. Let the neglected missionary fields be strengthened, especially in our new schools! We suggest therefore the organization of the education of team-workers and leaders, the strengthening of the content of religious education, the evangelization of the intellectuals (especially the teachers), moreover the lifting up of the fallen, for example, the bringing about of *the folk college that works well in other denominations.*
6. We are following the situation of the youth work of our church with great concern, as some of us have already made known recently in our weekly journal's columns. We would advise our church youth workers to meet at least once annually with our church leaders, so that they can measure their work against the measure of the Word!
7. Last but not least, let us strengthen the praying community of believers: we should pray regularly, individually, and congregationally for the spiritual awakening of our church, the thirst for clear teachings and an individual way of life that pleases God!

To sum up in one sentence: In the interest of the life of our church, a much more biblical and reformation-based foundation must be the basis of our orientation.

We know that the Lutheran Church in Hungary is a minority church, a small boat in the sea of the Hungarian nation. Although it is small, it

illustrates well the present captivity of our church and the captivity and suffering of Christ's church in general. This was especially represented by the figures of the recent census; since 1949 the members of the Lutheran Church in Hungary have decreased by 37.6%, which is about twice (!) as much as the decrease experienced in the other two historical churches. Overall, of course these decreases are the result of the general secularization of society. In our view, this frightening statistic correlates with our theological diagnosis of the quality of the church.

We also know that Christ's church on earth will never be spotless. We are not struggling for an idealistically pure church, but for a church that lives with the *reality* of the confession and forgiveness of sins. In this way, although our declaration may be linked to concrete individuals, our letter is not against them. It is not the individuals, but the phenomena that are important. It is these phenomena, that destroy and hold our church captive, that we wish to point out. We are members of one body and one community with our fellows: their sins are our sins, their mistakes are our mistakes. We do not demand infallibility for ourselves either, that our view is the only valid one and thus compulsory for everybody. Naturally we hold that our church may contain various pieties and factions, yet within limits. But according to our view, these limits have been transgressed.

We believe that we have been called to this confession by God's Holy Spirit, on the dawn of the third millenium after our Lord's ministry on earth, to cease the negative phenomena in our Lutheran Church in Hungary.

It is with the obligations and responsibilities of the confessor that we turn to the people of our church: let us hold a true confession of our sins and let us stand together with the new strength we have received from above, to minister the gospel entrusted to us today!

In the name of Jesus Christ, the only one capable of freeing us from our sins, transgressions and captivity, we greet you with the verse for 2002: "Behold, God is my salvation, I will trust and not be afraid." (Isaiah 12:2a)

May God protect our Lutheran Church in Hungary!
A Mighty Fortress is Our God!

[Signatures]

The Background and the Afterlife of the "Captivity Letter"

by TIBOR FABINY, JR.

THE LUTHERAN CHURCH IN HUNGARY (LCH) is a minority church (300,000 members out of ten million inhabitants). The Church survived Turkish occupation (16–17th century), forced return to Roman Catholicism during the Habsburgs (until 1918), and Nazi and Soviet occupations in the 20th century. As all churches of Eastern Europe during Communism (1945–1989), the LCH had to find her own way, a *modus vivendi*. The leading figure of the LCH in that period was Bishop Zoltán Káldy (1919–1987) who hosted the Seventh Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation in 1984 in Budapest, for the first time behind the Iron Curtain, and was there elected as President of the LWF. However, his “theology of diakonia” and his “dictatorial style of leadership” was criticized by an “Open Letter” during the Assembly by Zoltán Dóka (1929–2000), a Pastor of his Diocese. This letter was the first of a sequence of confessing documents written by members of the church at the end of Communism and in the first decades of parliamentary democracy in 1986, in 1989, and in 2002 respectively. Since 1984 the LCH has been a divided church. There has been a strong opposition to the leadership, under the umbrella “The Ordass Lajos Friendly Circle” (OLBK), named after the confessing Bishop Lajos Ordass (1901–1978) and its organ, the quarterly *Keresztény igazság* (Christian Truth) published since 1989.

The OLBK has always emphasized the necessity of reforming the structure of the church by replacing the “Two Diocese” form imposed during Stalinism a “Three Diocese” Structure. In 1997 the Synod of the Church eventually managed to secure the re-establishment of the “Dunántúl” (now “Western” Diocese), a stronghold of Hungarian Lutheranism. To the surprise of many, a prominent figure of the opposition (the Ordass Lajos Friendly Circle), Pastor János Ittész (1944–) was elected as Bishop in May 2000. Thus an entirely new church leadership was set up in January 2001 with Bishop Imre Szebik (1939–) as Presiding Bishop. Missionary activity was coordinated by the committee for mission and evangelization under the leadership of Pastor Péter Gáncs (1950–) who was elected as Bishop of the Southern Diocese to succeed Bishop Béla Harmati (1936–) in June of 2003.

However, despite the changes of structure and personnel, there have remained several old problems within the church, especially with regard to spirituality and certain theological, doctrinal and moral issues. Therefore, in November of 2001 several pastors and laymen came together at the initiative of Senior Pastor János Szeverényi to pray for the renewal of the church and to take action.

Summarizing the unresolved and spiritually destructive issues, "The Captivity of Our Church Today" was written and publicly read as an open letter at a gathering convened by Senior Pastor Szeverényi in his congregation of Kelenföld on the 8th of January 2002.

All the three Bishops of the LCH (Bishop Harmati, Bishop Szebik, Bishop Ittész) attended this meeting privately, and by that date 254 members of the church had signed the letter which was eventually published two months later in the Lutheran monthly *Lelekipásztor*. The letter, which called "secularism" the sign of the recent captivity of the church, must have addressed a very significant issue, as the reaction was unexpectedly and unprecedentedly sensitive. The letter immediately created friends and foes. It was the subject of debate on the internet homepage of the LCH ("Fraternet"), though the official weekly paper of the church tried to silence the issue. As a result of the letter, the leaders of the church organized an "Open Forum" on April 12, 2002, to discuss the antecedents and consequences of what has come to be called the "Captivity Letter." On the first anniversary of the signing of the letter the author clarified the threefold theological message of the letter: 1) a summoning for repentance of the whole church; 2) hamartology, namely, that sin is both "seen" and "unseen" within the church; and 3) community-theology or the ecclesiological aspect, namely, that members of the same body are meant to carry one another's burden in terms of Galatians 6.2.

As a consequence of the letter, the organizers and many who signed it felt it necessary to continue the momentum in an organized form. Therefore, on March 16 of 2002 the "Lutheran Inner Mission and Friends Society" (EBBE) was formed for uniting all those who on the basis of the gospel of the cross of Christ offer their service for the revival of the whole church. The church leadership, though hesitant at the beginning, became more and more supportive of the movement and the work of the society.

The Society filled a huge gap, for since the end of World War II there was no Inner Mission program in the Hungarian Lutheran Church. However, before 1945 there were significant initiatives and organizations, traditions that we wished to continue: namely, the Inner Mission Program of the Dunántúl (now Western) diocese and the “Brotherly Movement” of devoted pastors and laymen who regularly came together to pray for the renewal of the church and were committed to take action along these lines. Both forms of renewal were officially forbidden during the Communist era.

In June of 2002 a retired pastor and senior theologian, Dr. Károly Hafenscher, articulated his fears in an article entitled “Reformation or Inquisition” (in *Lelekpásztor*) that might have temporarily damaged the reputation of the movement in the public opinion. He argued that the Reformation and Luther’s *theologia crucis* are insufficient today and that an Inner Mission Society might create an elite within the church, if not a new church. His critique was answered by the author and by other sympathizers of the movement and the debate came to a peaceful and brotherly end.

Since March of 2002 the EBBE meets once a month for communal prayer and for a lecture. In the autumn of 2002 the first issue of its periodical *Tájéoló* was launched. Since January 2003 the lectures are organized in the form of round-table dialogues in order to fulfill the movement’s threefold purpose:

1. It fights for a renewal beyond the one in our individual Christian lives, *for an awakening of the entire Church* with frequent prayer and decisive ministry. The Inner Mission is understood above all as “self-mission” but it also gives particular attention to its members who are secularized, to dying congregations and diaspora churches.
2. For the renewal of the church, it finds *theological reflection* to be an unavoidable necessity, first in the legacy of the Reformation and the validity of Lutheran theology that still has much to say to today’s people.
3. It is a *wide-reaching, open movement and organization*, whose members, though representatives of different factions, fit alongside each other well. The different factions hold discourses with each other in the light of God’s Word. Keeping in mind the idea of Christian fellowship, they search unceasingly for contact with those believers who think differently than they. This approach is unavoidable for true peace and reconciliation in Christ.



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