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**Opportunities and Limitations of Adapting Modern
Church-Building Models in the Reformed Church of
Transylvania**

Scientific Supervisor:

Prof. Dr. Sándor Fazakas

Candidate:

András Péntek-Gyimesi

Guidance Committee:

Dr. Gabriella Gorbai

Dr. Alpár Csaba Nagy

Dr. Szabolcs Kovács

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Table of content	1
Abstract	6
Preface.	9
I. SITUATION ANALYSIS.	10
I.1. The Inherited Nature of the Church.	12
I.2. The Liberal Framework	16
Christianity on the Stage of History.	19
I.3. Immunization Against the Church.	22
I.3.1. Entanglement of Church and State.	22
I.3.2. Superficial Christianity.	22
I.3.3. Loss of the Monopoly Position.	24
I.3.4. Reductive Theology.	26
I.3.5. Moralizing	27
I.4. The Question of Church Membership within Changed Ecclesial Frameworks	28
I.4.1. Causes of the Exodus	29
I.4.2. Congregation, Community	32
I.4.3. The Impact of Spatiality on the Church and Religious Practice.	36
I.4.4. The Impact of Digital and Mediatized Society on Religiosity.	37
New Trends in the West.	39

I.5. Opportunities and Limitations – An Overview of the Transylvanian Reformed Church District from the Perspective of Adapting Modern Church Building Schools	43
I.5.1. Changes in the Transylvanian Reformed Church District.	45
I.5.2. Church in a Minority Position, Church and Society..	48
I.5.3. Changes in Transylvanian Religiosity in the Post-Communist Era.	53
I.5.4. Church Attendance.	55
I.5.5. Where is Religiosity Heading?.	57
I.5.6. Shift in Values.	59
I.5.7. Summary.	62
I.6. Conceptualizing the Protestant Pastoral Role.	63
I.6.1. Reformed Religion in Transylvania in the Light of Empirical Research.	63
I.6.2. Relationship to the Church	64
I.6.3. The Relationship Between Identity Consciousness and Religiosity.	66
I.6.4. The Protestant Pastoral Role.	69
I.6.5. The Core Congregation and the Question of Co-workers.	81
I.6.6. Where to Next? Opportunities, Perspectives.	83
I.6.6.1. Opportunities Within Existing Structures.	84
I.6.6.1.1. Worship Service as an Opportunity for Church Building.	84
I.6.6.1.2. Administration of Sacraments with Evangelical Witness	84
I.6.6.1.3. Proclaiming the Simple Gospel on Occasional Services (Casualia).	85

I.6.6.1.4. Small Groups and Ecclesiolae as Opportunities for the Ecclesia to Develop.	85
I.6.6.2. Opportunities in Post-Christian Times.	85
I.7. Ecclesiology and Understanding of Office in the Reformed Church.	88
Ordination.	95
I.8. The Priesthood of All Believers.	98
I.8.1. Old Testament Roots.	99
I.8.2. The Priesthood of Jesus Christ.	100
I.8.3. The Priesthood of the Christian Congregation.	102
I.8.4. Luther's and Barth's Teachings on the Priesthood of All Believers	104
I.8.5. Present Situation and Position	108
I.9. The "Folk Church" (Volkskirche) Nature of the Transylvanian Reformed Church.	117
I.9.1. Historical Background.	119
I.9.2. Theological Foundation of the Folk Church.	119
I.9.3. Characteristics and Conditions of the Folk Church.	120
I.9.4. Outlook.	121
I.10. From Ecclesia to Institution, from Institution to Ecclesia.	123
I.10.1. Brunner's Line of Thought and Argumentation.	124
I.10.2. The Congregation of Christ and the Holy Spirit.	126

I.10.3. Why Did the Church Become an Institution?.	128
I.10.4. The Theology of Church Building of Fritz and Christian Schwarz.	129
I.10.4.1. The Dynamic Nature of the Congregation.	130
I.10.4.2. The Static Nature of the Congregation.	130
I.10.5. The Task of Churches to Become Ecclesia.	131
II. MODERN CHURCH BUILDING MODELS..	132
II.1. The Baseline of Our Era: From Folk Church to Religious Market.	132
II.2. Michael Herbst's Church Building Model.	133
II.2.1. Herbst's Missional Stance and the Cybernetic Situation	133
II.2.2. Missional Identity and Ecumenical Perspective.	135
II.2.3. Spiritual Renewal and Community Dynamics.	135
II.2.4. Core Cybernetic Elements.	135
II.2.4.1. First Core Element: Spiritual Renewal and Cybernetic Training of the Ministry.	136
II.2.4.2. Second Core Element: The Laity.	141
II.2.4.2.1. The Need.	141
II.2.4.2.2. The Stalled Reformation.	142
II.2.4.2.3. Baptism and the Renewal of Baptism.	142
II.2.4.3. Third Core Element: Outsiders / The Lapsed.	146

II.2.5. Cybernetic Program..	149
II.3. The Herne Program..	150
II.3.1. Transparent Congregation	150
II.3.2. Practical Aspects.	153
II.3.3. Theological Evaluation.	154
II.4. Stefan Paas's Church Building Model.	155
II.4.1. Evangelism in Practice.	155
II.4.2. Characteristics of Newcomers	155
II.4.3. A Forest of Expectations.	156
II.4.4. Traditional, Modern, and Postmodern People.	157
II.4.5. Rules of the Game.	158
II.4.5.1. God's New Ways	158
II.4.5.2. Low Threshold and Sublime Goal	158
II.4.5.3. The "Game".	160
II.4.5.3.1. What is Christian?	160
II.4.5.3.2. Evangelism and Catechesis.	160
II.4.5.3.3. Lifelong Learning	161
II.4.5.4. A Congregation with Diverse Missional Programs	161
II.4.6. Essential Ingredients of an Evangelistic Worship Service	162

II.5. Summary.	162
III. THE PRESENT AND FUTURE POSSIBILITIES OF TRANSYLVANIAN REFORMED CHRISTIANS – RESEARCH AND ADAPTATION OF MODELS..	164
III.1. Investigation into the Church Building Practices of Transylvanian Reformed Pastors.	164
III.1.1. Starting Points and Methodology of the Research.	164
III.1.2. Evaluation of Structured In-depth Interviews.	168
III.1.3. Summary.	173
III.2. Possibilities and Limitations of Adaptation	174
III.2.1. Excursus.	179
III.2.2. Finding a Healthy Balance.	185
III.2.3. Missional Congregation.	186
III.2.4. Profile Congregations.	190
III.2.5. Summary.	192
III.2.6. From Concept to Program Implementation.	196
Afterword.	197
Appendix.	199
I. Questionnaire for Examining the Church Building Activities of Transylvanian Reformed Pastors.	199
II. Bible Schools.	200

II.1. Bethel Bible School.	200
II.2. Emmaus Course – The Path of Spiritual Renewal.	200
II.3. Alpha and Beta Courses.	201
II.4. Cursillo – The Intensive Three-Day Path of Faith.	202
Bibliography.	204
List of Publications.	214
Biblical / Exegetical Studies.	214
Studies Published in Conference Volumes.	215
Translations.	215

Introduction

András Péntek-Gyimesi's doctoral dissertation examines whether modern models of church development can be adapted to the Transylvanian Reformed Church without disregarding its Reformed identity, historical experience, and continuing character as a “people's church.” The inquiry begins from a pastoral and institutional tension. Transylvanian Reformed congregations still possess extensive territorial structures, public recognition, inherited membership, and deep links with Hungarian minority identity, yet active participation and personal commitment no longer follow automatically from baptism or cultural belonging. The central question is therefore not simply how the church can preserve its existing organization, but how inherited structures might again serve living communities marked by faith, fellowship, service, and mission.

The dissertation argues that neither rigid traditionalism nor the uncritical importation of foreign programs offers an adequate answer. Its preferred alternative is context-sensitive adaptation: theological continuity should be maintained while structures and practices are evaluated according to their capacity to support Christian community and mission. The study develops this argument in three stages. First, it provides a historical, sociological, and theological diagnosis of institutional Christianity and of the Transylvanian setting. Second, it examines models associated with Michael Herbst, Fritz and Christian A. Schwarz, and Stefan Paas. Third, it compares these models with qualitative interviews conducted among Transylvanian Reformed pastors and proposes principles for local application. Throughout the dissertation, “church development” means more than numerical expansion or organizational efficiency. It refers to the formation of congregations in which proclamation, communal life, and service belong together and in which formal members are invited into conscious discipleship.

The Crisis of Inherited Church Membership and the Transylvanian Context

The situational analysis distinguishes the global vitality of Christianity in several regions from the severe institutional weakening experienced in much of Europe. The author rejects a simple account in which modernization necessarily eliminates religion. Instead, the dissertation describes a divergence between continuing spiritual interest and declining attachment to established churches. The traditional European people's-church model assumed that individuals inherited affiliation through family, baptism, education, and social environment. Such affiliation did not normally require a personal decision. In a pluralistic society, however, religion has

become optional, and belonging increasingly depends on an individual's deliberate choice. The dissertation consequently expects the future church to rely more heavily on voluntarily chosen affiliation and explicit commitment.

This transition is interpreted through secularization, religious individualization, and the emergence of a religious market. Institutional authority has weakened, while individuals assemble personal forms of belief from multiple sources. The result may be “believing without belonging,” private spirituality, or a syncretistic combination of Christian and non-Christian elements. At the same time, the dissertation resists treating all choice as shallow consumerism. Voluntary affiliation may generate stronger commitment than inherited membership, provided that the search leads into an actual community. Faith is personal, the author insists, but not individualistic: without worship, mutual responsibility, and shared practice, privately constructed spirituality can remain unstable and underdeveloped.

Several institutional failures intensify estrangement. The dissertation discusses the historical entanglement of church and state, superficial Christianity produced by mass affiliation, the loss of religious monopoly, reductive theology, and the moralization of faith. In this account, a church can become socially present yet spiritually indistinct when it reduces Christianity either to cultural convention or to respectable conduct. Attempts to remove difficult theological claims in order to retain nominal members may also deprive the church of the very content for which religious seekers approach it. The author's diagnosis is explicitly theological: a missionally renewed church requires a Christology centered on Christ's saving work rather than an account of Jesus limited to moral example. These claims form the confessional basis of the dissertation and should be distinguished from its empirical observations.

The Transylvanian case shares broader European trends but also has distinct features. Communist repression limited church activity, while the post-1989 period brought a brief rise in religious participation and extensive building projects. That revival later stabilized and, in many settings, declined. Reformed identity remains connected to Hungarian minority identity, especially where church, language, and cultural continuity reinforce one another. Yet urbanization, migration, social differentiation, and generational change have weakened inherited patterns. The dissertation also describes an incongruity between relatively high self-reported religiosity and much lower regular participation. It reports that official data for 2024 placed average Sunday attendance at 9.67 percent and the proportion of registered members paying

church contributions at 47.51 percent; these figures are presented as signs that nominal membership and active participation no longer coincide .

Digital and mediatized culture further modifies religious authority and practice. Religious content now circulates through networks in which institutions compete with lay creators, algorithms, and highly personalized forms of consumption. Online groups may broaden access, but mediated participation cannot automatically replace embodied community. The dissertation therefore treats digital forms as possible points of contact that require reconnection to durable congregational relationships. Its broader conclusion is that spiritual interest has not simply vanished. The institutional church has lost its privileged position and must learn to communicate within a plural field while offering communities substantial enough to move beyond episodic religious consumption.

Ecclesiology, Ministry, and the Universal Priesthood

The theological center of the dissertation is the distinction between the church as an institution and the New Testament *ecclesia* as a community in Christ and the Holy Spirit. Drawing especially on Emil Brunner and the subsequent work of Fritz and Christian Schwarz, the author identifies three marks of living congregational reality: *kerygma* (proclamation), *koinonia* (fellowship), and *diakonia* (service). Institutional arrangements are not rejected. Legal order, offices, buildings, finances, and stable procedures can protect and support communal life. They become problematic when institutional maintenance is treated as identical with the life of the church or as an end in itself. The institution's proper task is to serve the emergence and growth of *ecclesia*.

This distinction reshapes the understanding of ordained ministry. The dissertation traces the Reformation's rejection of a sacramental hierarchy that places clergy ontologically above other baptized Christians. In the Reformed account presented here, ordained office has a necessary functional authority: pastors bear particular responsibility for preaching, the sacraments, theological teaching, and leadership. Yet office exists within and for the community, not above it. The Transylvanian practice described in the dissertation remains strongly pastor-centered, partly because historical circumstances expanded the pastor's responsibilities into administration, cultural organization, representation, and public mediation. Such accumulation

can blur vocation, produce overload, and leave congregations dependent and immature (Péntek-Gyimesi, 2026, pp. 63–98).

The universal priesthood provides the alternative, although the dissertation does not equate it with the abolition of leadership. Every baptized believer is called to witness and service, but gifts must be recognized, formed, and coordinated. Lay participation is therefore not merely a practical solution to pastoral overwork. It belongs to the church's theological nature as a body in which different members contribute distinct gifts. The pastor's leadership should gradually enable others to read Scripture, provide care, lead groups, practice diaconal service, and bear witness in society. This creates a productive paradox: in a pastor-centered system, the pastor is initially the principal agent who must dismantle excessive pastor-centeredness. The desired outcome is not a leaderless church but mature, shared responsibility under Christ.

Modern Church-Development Models: Herbst, Schwarz, and Paas

Michael Herbst's model addresses missional development within the people's church. It rejects both “morphological fundamentalism,” which preserves inherited structures because they are inherited, and an additive approach, which continually attaches new activities to an unchanged system without a unifying purpose. Herbst distinguishes a general concept from a local program. The concept supplies theological direction; the program translates it into decisions appropriate to a particular congregation. A “cybernetic” approach in this context means reflective leadership that integrates theological judgment with empirical knowledge, communication, coordination, and evaluation.

Herbst organizes renewal around three groups: pastors, the committed congregational core, and people who are distant from church life. Pastoral renewal comes first because pastors often control both formal structures and practical initiative. Their spiritual life, theological work, time management, ability to collaborate, and capacity to lead require renewal. The goal is a new pastoral role in which the minister remains responsible for Word and sacrament while becoming a trainer and coordinator of others. The congregational core must then be guided from passive attachment toward conscious appropriation of baptism, personal faith, discovery of gifts, and service. Small groups provide a setting for Scripture, prayer, fellowship, and the gradual recognition of leadership. Finally, the congregation must turn toward distant or nominal members through sustained evangelization rather than isolated events. Personal witness,

hospitable congregational life, and explicit invitations to faith and community should form one continuing process. The resulting local program asks what should continue, what should be reduced, what should begin, which priorities come first, and which people can reach particular groups within a realistic period.

The Herne program developed by Fritz and Christian Schwarz gives sharper emphasis to the distinction between institution and *ecclesia*. It defines a congregation through faith, fellowship, and service, while recognizing that living communities require institutional support. Its practical sequence begins with the pastor's renewal and an external supervisor, continues through conversations with elders and potential co-workers, and forms a stable team that meets for Scripture, prayer, pastoral care, celebration, and planning. The parish is divided into manageable areas, and trained members establish contact through visits. Contact develops through stages: making the congregation visible, extending invitations, offering personal testimony, and inviting people into a relationship with Christ and the community. This model treats permanent evangelization as a mark of the church rather than as an occasional campaign. Its strength is the close connection among theological identity, trained co-workers, relational outreach, and follow-up; its risk lies in the possible hardening of the distinction between a spiritually defined inner community and the broader institution.

Stefan Paas begins more explicitly with outsiders and entrants in post-Christian society. His model asks how people without established Christian socialization come to faith and become integrated into a congregation. The dissertation's account of Paas emphasizes that entry is usually relational and gradual. Friends and family are important points of contact, conversion may follow a long search rather than a single dramatic moment, and awareness of sin may develop after an initial encounter with Christ rather than before it. Congregations therefore need hospitable worship, small groups, pastoral accompaniment, and a form of catechesis that continues beyond first contact.

Paas summarizes the task as a "low threshold and high goal." The threshold is low because newcomers should not be forced immediately into inherited customs or judged by standards they have not yet learned. The goal remains high because inclusion is directed toward discipleship, ethical formation, service, and a sustained relationship with Christ. Paas allows for differentiated forms or stages of belonging, including guest participation before full membership. He also proposes worship that remains recognizably Christian while being intelligible and

hospitable to outsiders. In contrast to Herbst's primary concern with renewing an existing people's-church system, Paas gives greater attention to the route traveled by those who begin outside it. The dissertation treats these approaches as complementary: Herbst and Schwarz reorganize internal congregational life, while Paas keeps renewal directed toward people whom existing structures do not reach.

Empirical Study of Transylvanian Reformed Pastors

The empirical section uses structured in-depth interviews with eight pastors selected for their sustained commitment to mission and church development. Three were retired and five were active pastors over forty-five; two served in rural settings, while the majority represented urban or central congregations. Interviews took place in familiar settings, usually a parish residence or the participant's home, and lasted approximately ninety minutes to two hours. The sample was designed to identify mature practices and long-term experience rather than to represent all Transylvanian Reformed pastors.

Most urban participants had begun in newly established congregations with relatively little inherited local tradition. This provided freedom for innovation, although church construction often accompanied spiritual development. Rural pastors faced stronger local customs and slower change, but the openness of the early post-communist period created opportunities. With one exception, their work was not preceded by systematic sociological research or a fully articulated concept. Strategies developed intuitively through family visits, conversation, observation, and responses to emerging needs. The pastor who had studied missiology and church development abroad worked more deliberately and reportedly saw results sooner. Across the interviews, personal contact emerged as the common principle: a culture of expecting people to come to church had to be replaced by a culture of going to them.

Pastors usually initiated the selection of a close team, often beginning with elders and especially the chief elder, then widening participation through diaconal co-workers. In some cases, pastors identified candidates before formal election, a practice the dissertation notes as differing from the canonical procedure by which the congregation nominates and elects elders. Training followed selection and included biblical, theological, and practical preparation. Stable groups for youth, women, prayer, choirs, young couples, or men provided continuity, while short-term groups formed around festivals, evangelistic events, or children's work. These groups

decentralized service, involved peripheral members, and supported spiritual formation, although the interviews also reported fatigue, the loss of co-workers, and the collapse of some groups.

Courses such as Alpha, Beta, Cursillo, and other forms of guided Bible study were associated with greater biblical competence and willingness to serve. Participants learned to study Scripture, articulate their faith, lead groups, visit families, and take responsibility in mission. The people's-church framework itself appeared as both opportunity and obstacle. Baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and funerals create points of contact with people who otherwise remain distant. At the same time, rigid liturgical expectations, consumer attitudes, low commitment, and the diversity of nominal membership make a unified strategy difficult. Interviewees called for more personal visitation, marriage and family support, prayer, adult education, and formal training in missiology and church development. The study's principal conclusion is that a missional outlook is not an additional program on a pastor's schedule but a perspective through which all congregational activity is evaluated.

Possibilities and Limits of Contextual Adaptation

The dissertation rejects uniform implementation because Transylvanian congregations differ by region, settlement type, social composition, religious socialization, and inherited practice. Rural communities may retain stronger traditional ties but change slowly; urban congregations may be more secularized yet more open to new networks and differentiated forms. Local research is therefore a prerequisite for responsible action. The author proposes that each congregation identify its history, active relationships, spiritual needs, available gifts, financial conditions, institutional constraints, and groups that remain unreached before designing a program. Foreign models should supply questions and principles, not a script.

A major institutional limitation is the historical absence of missiology from pastoral formation at the Protestant Theological Institute in Cluj. According to the dissertation, missiology became a taught discipline there only in the 2016/2017 academic year. This helps explain why many pastors inherited administrative and liturgical roles without equivalent preparation in empirical analysis, team formation, evangelization, or strategic congregational leadership. The proposed response includes revised theological education, continuing training, supervision, and the cultivation of pastors who can unite spiritual depth with organizational competence.

Adaptation must also preserve an equilibrium between theological continuity and cultural responsiveness. The dissertation treats biblical Christology, proclamation, worship, and the sacraments as non-negotiable centers, while language, forms of contact, group structures, and leadership practices remain open to revision. Mission includes both evangelization and diaconal service, but neither should absorb the other. Evangelization protects mission from becoming indistinct social activism; diakonia protects proclamation from becoming speech without embodied love. The church must be close enough to understand its society while distinct enough to offer a coherent Christian identity.

The appendix illustrates how this general approach might be embodied in formation programs. The two-year Bethel Bible School emphasizes sustained study of the whole biblical narrative and the preparation of competent congregational co-workers. The Emmaus course combines testimony, prayer, Scripture, small-group conversation, and follow-up in order to deepen personal faith and communal participation. Alpha introduces Christian fundamentals in an informal setting, while Beta develops discipleship, biblical practice, prayer, and service among participants seeking further formation. Cursillo offers an intensive three-day experience supported by preparation and continuing small-group fellowship. The dissertation does not present these programs as interchangeable or universally transferable. Their shared value lies in connecting instruction with relationship, personal appropriation, continuing accompaniment, and a path into responsible service.

One proposed structural development is the “profile congregation,” which concentrates on particular strengths or groups rather than attempting every form of ministry at an average level. In cities, congregations with different profiles could serve complementary constituencies; in rural regions, several parishes could cooperate to cover ministries that none can sustain alone. Profiling may improve competence and accessibility, but it also risks fragmentation by age, piety, education, or interest. It therefore requires deliberate practices that preserve unity across differences. The movement from concept to program follows a consistent sequence: establish a theological and missional purpose, study the local situation, involve and train co-workers, select priorities, design concrete steps, and evaluate whether existing structures serve the intended goal. In the dissertation's concise formula, structure should follow strategy, while strategy should follow the church's mission.

Critical Synthesis

The dissertation's strongest internal connection is the movement from diagnosis through ecclesiology to practice. The decline of inherited participation establishes the problem; the distinction between institution and *ecclesia* supplies a normative criterion; the three modern models translate that criterion into leadership, groups, catechesis, and outreach; and the interviews demonstrate that comparable practices have emerged locally, often without a formal theoretical framework. Agreement among Herbst, Schwarz, and Paas is substantial. All reject institutional maintenance as a sufficient purpose, affirm personal faith within community, give lay members an active vocation, and connect mission with sustained formation rather than isolated events. Their difference is mainly one of emphasis: Herbst offers systemic renewal within the people's church, Schwarz sharpens the institution-community distinction and relational program, and Paas follows the outsider's path into faith and belonging.

Several productive tensions remain. Pastors must lead the transition away from pastor-centeredness; institutions are criticized but also required; baptism grounds inclusion, while active membership requires a personal response; congregations should lower cultural barriers without lowering the goal of discipleship; and differentiated profiles can extend mission while threatening common identity. The dissertation generally treats these tensions as matters of contextual judgment rather than problems resolved by a universal formula.

The empirical evidence supports plausibility more securely than generalization. The purposive sample favors experienced, missionally committed pastors and contains few rural participants. It does not include unsuccessful initiatives, less engaged clergy, ordinary members, or people who left the church as independent respondent groups. Nor does the supplied text present a formal coding scheme or comparative outcome data. The interviews therefore show how certain practices can function, but they cannot establish how common these practices are or whether they alone caused congregational change. The dissertation is most persuasive when it presents the models as disciplined frameworks for local experimentation. Its broader predictions about institutional decline or renewal remain arguments supported by the sources it discusses, not results demonstrated by the eight interviews.

Conclusion

The dissertation concludes that the Transylvanian Reformed Church can retain the institutional advantages of the people's-church form only if those structures are redirected toward mission. Its central proposed shift is from inherited affiliation to personal commitment, from pastoral monopoly to trained shared ministry, from institutional consolidation to living congregational community, and from waiting for members to relational outreach. Herbst, Schwarz, and Paas offer compatible resources for this transition, but their programs must be adapted through local research and theological evaluation rather than copied wholesale.

The available evidence supports a cautious conclusion. The Transylvanian setting contains genuine resources: territorial presence, points of contact through rites of passage, minority-community bonds, buildings, trained clergy, and examples of committed local leadership. It also contains serious constraints: low participation, nominal membership, rigid expectations, uneven formation, clerical dependence, and substantial differences between urban and rural communities. The dissertation therefore presents renewal as a long-term process of spiritual, educational, and structural change. Because the empirical sample is small and purposive, the study offers a reasoned model for action rather than proof that one program will work throughout the church.

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