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FACULTY OF REFORMED THEOLOGY AND MUSIC  
DOCTORAL SCHOOL „ECUMENE”

The Institutional history of the Reformed  
Diocese of Mureş between the two world wars

DOCTORAL THESIS

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CLUJ-NAPOCA  
2022

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**Keywords:** Diocese, general assembly of the diocese, council, canonical visitation, diocese court, officials, administrative affairs, disciplinary affairs, school affairs.

## Summary

In 2003, through mandate of the Hungarian Cultural Society of Transylvania, I began research in Budapest, in the Military History Archives of the Military History Institute and Museum. Péter Szabó and Péter Illésfalvi military historian supervised and directed my work, which was far from simple. I primarily dealt with operational history, reserve officer training and the history of Transylvanian military formations, more precisely the history of the 27th Szekler light infantry division of the royal Hungarian army in Tîrgu-Mureş. Several of my works have been published in these topics. Later on, I also processed the history of regional valiant captaincy of Maros-Torda county.

In the meantime, I became employee of the Tîrgu-Mureş branch archive of the Reformed Diocese of Transylvania. "Owner" of an extremely rich source material. As my opportunities in Budapest were limited, with the encouragement of archivists Gábor Sipos and Sándor Pál-Antal, I began to take advantage of the opportunities offered by my workplace. I have published shorter articles on church, personality and school history topics. Although my study on the history of the Tîrgu-Mureş hospital during the period of the principality was a milestone for me in the field of church history research, I still didn't feel familiar with it. As my interest tends towards present history, I felt like a cataract smith, and at that time there was really no one to ask for guidance.

In 2011, I compiled the biography of dean József Tótfalusi, and in 2014 I collected data on the requisitioned bells of the Diocese of Mureş for a conference in Debrecen. It was then that I became interested in the history of the diocese between the two world wars. At the suggestion of my archivist colleague Sándor Előd Ósz, I started looking through the diocese documents kept in the archives, and then published partial studies from them. Professors Dezső Buzogány and Vilmos Kolumbán helped me a lot in this, they were the ones who offered publishing opportunity for me, they being a great support in my further studies.



Taking all this into account, it is understandable that in 2016, professor Dezső Buzogány and I decided that the topic of my dissertation would be the institutional history of the Diocese of Mureș between the two world wars. This topic was also a challenge, because as far as we know, this kind of work has not been made yet regarding this era, so we are aware of our responsibility and try to fill this gap.

***The period is very well defined.***

With the enactment of the Treaty of Trianon, the Romanian empire officially began, and this ended in 1940 with the Second Vienna Award. Our topic is wedged between these two defining historical landmarks.

We did not aim to create a monography of the diocese. In this thesis, we discuss the ***formation and functioning of the*** modern ***institutions*** of the diocese. Despite the fact that the diocesan regulations of 1868 can be regarded as an era boundary, we have stuck to the historical faultlines defined above for the sake of better clarity.

By 1920, the structure of the diocese was essentially established, and the sphere of attributions of its institutions was clarified. However, the change of empire created a peculiar situation that the church leadership had not encountered before. The institutions, offices and officials of the diocese had to adapt to this and carry out their tasks within these conditions. For this reason, their dynamics is much more pronounced in this period than, for example, in the period before the First World War. First of all, we investigated what kind of cases the diocese's institutions faced, what their causes and consequences were. The Vienna Diktat is also an era boundary. The ecclesiastical relations created by the "small Hungarian world" are completely different from those of the previous era, so we decided to discuss our topic until the end of the Romanian power structure.

***In the following, we will talk about the sources and methods of the research.***

The primary source of our thesis is the archives of the Reformed Diocese of Mureș, which is kept by the Tîrgu-Mureș rural archives of the Reformed Diocese of Transylvania. The part of the archival material between 1920 and 1940 is quite incomplete. The first of the *general assembly minutes* covers the period between 1925 and 1935. The next record was kept from 1939. We know of two of the *council meeting minutes* so far. One of them contains the data of the meetings held in January-May 1923, the other one the cases discussed between November 1931 and February

1935. We know of only one *court record* for the examined period, which contains administrative court and disciplinary cases discussed between 1926 and 1931.

The most complete and complex series of the archival material are the *administrative documents*. This includes the *dean's*, *head recorder's*, *educational*, *auditor's* and *home mission* reports between the two world wars, as well as *visitation records*, which previously have been kept separately. In the same time, it includes the case files of the diocese between 1605 and 1930.

Shortly before the submission of the thesis, a fragment-material from the diocese archives related to the 1930s was discovered. Out of these there were organised the dean's report of May 1933 and the visitation records of 1933 and 1934. However, the dean's report of 1930/31 and 1935 could not be made coherent and usable. Part of the documents of the diocese is still latent. We hope that we shall find additional useful sources during the archival investigations.

The majority of the diocesan archives are made up of *parish collectors*. The collectors contain little data about the diocese. After the division of the diocese in 1927, some of the parishes were transferred to the Reformed Diocese of Bekecsalja. From that time on, the archives of the diocese formed a separate fund.

Among the sources used are the archives of the Reformed Parish of Tîrgu-Mureş between 1920 and 1940, from which we mainly used the part related to the visitation. We also used efficiently the personal materials and death notices kept in the Tîrgu-Mureş Archives.

Additional sources of our research were the archival documents kept in the archives of Reformed Diocese of Transylvania. Primarily, the files and meeting minutes of the *Board of Directors' archive* covering this period (1919–1940). The documents of the *episcopal archive*, as well as the visitation records of Diocese of Mureş and the *documents of the consistory court*. The latter, contrary to our expectations, unfortunately did not contain relevant data on diocesan affairs.

Our thesis was enriched with useful data taken from official church publications and newspapers, daily, weekly or monthly press products, as well as the bibliography related to our topic.

The research plan was determined by the topic and its division. First, we defined the larger chapters of the thesis. After that followed the exploring of archival sources. These determined the assignment and proportionality of the subsections. The data were grouped by the types of cases (administration, visitation, litigation and school cases).

In parallel with the processing of archival sources, we began to collect and organise printed sources. We also divided them thematically.

After collecting the data, we started to write the different subsections. Cases were organised thematically and sorted chronologically. In the case of a larger amount of data on a topic, we used a statistical method. For better clarity, graphs and tables were made. Statistical data as well as interesting or very extensive documents omitted from the main text or related to it, were placed in the appendix.

At the end of the chapters, we tried to formulate conclusions, and the thesis ends with a general conclusion.

The thesis is divided into *six chapters*.

The *first chapter* presents the history of the Reformed Diocese of Mureş from its foundation to the 20th century. In the Middle Ages, the parishes of Marosszék belonged to the Telegdi archdeaconry. The majorly Hungarian population of the region, was already reformed in the 16th century. The community of Tîrgu-Mureş played a significant role in this. Under the influence of Lutheran ideas, the religious life of the inhabitants of the town got transformed. It is likely that the Hungarian population of the town and its surroundings was predominantly Lutheran at that time.

However, the Helvetian reformation gained ground and the ministers gathered at the Tîrgu-Mureş synod in November 1559 already took position in favor of the Reformed doctrine of the Lord's Supper. This made clear the separation of the Lutheran and the Helvetic lines. It is more than likely that the inhabitants of the town and its surroundings have already professed Reformed principles at that time. With the election of Dénes Alesius as bishop (1571), the process of church organisation began, which actually led to the formation of the Diocese of Mureş. The Lutheran bishop ordered the priests under his authority to form chapters and elect deans. It is likely that the Tîrgu Mureş chapter was established at this time, which brought together the majority of the parishes of the former Mureş district, as well as the Reformed congregations of the Tekei chapter that adhered to it.

The first dean of the diocese was Máté Göcsi. He was elected bishop in 1579. We do not know exactly how many of the regional and county congregations fell under the administration of the Mureş chapter, but we do know the names of the deans. In 1641, the congregations in Cluj and Torda counties separated from the Diocese of Mureş and created the Gurghiu Diocese. Until 1641,

the *Matricula* mentions five names: Máté Göcsi, János Szilvási, János Batizi, Pál Kőrösi and István Tiszabecsi. Péter Borzási was the first dean managing only the regional parishes.

In *the second chapter*, we tried to present the organisation and institutions of the Reformed Diocese of Mureş in the first half of the 20th century.

According to the church regulations of 1868, the affairs of the dioceses were managed by the diocesan general assembly, the council and the court. The dean's status as president was preserved even within this framework. The 1915 regulations of the Diocese of Mureş adopted and practiced this diocesan regulation.

The *general assembly of the diocese* is the body representing and exercising the independent rights of the diocese. Its president is the dean, and its deputy is the head recorder. The double presidency (dean–head recorder) existing in the Hungarian Reformed Church was not used in this region. Its membership was made up of ordinary and ordained priests, teachers of the diocese, as well as elected secular representatives. The rights and duties of the members were precisely regulated.

In the Diocese of Mureş the general assembly was called together annually until 1935, thereafter every two years. The main reason for the postponement of the general assembly was the prohibition of the state authorities. These meetings were on their agenda. This included the dean's and the head recorder's reports, the presentation of senior transcripts, the auditor's, educational speaker's and treasurer's reports, council and committee proposals related to the above subjects. The general assembly was also responsible for electing diocesan officials! Minutes were made of the meetings, which, unlike to today's practice, were drawn up by the vice-recorder.

The *diocese council* is the direct governing body of the diocese. Its president is the dean. The council members were included in the board ex officio (dean, head curator, head clerk, curator) and by election (6 church and 6 secular councilors). The council met monthly, in exceptional cases quarterly. In the period between the two assemblies, it supervised, among other things, the financial, construction and spiritual affairs of the parishes. It examined and approved the budgets and calculations, certified the representatives and ordered the disciplinary procedure. The *diocese court* was responsible for investigating cases and making judgments. This institution adjudicated the diocese's administrative disputes and disciplinary cases in the first instance, and disciplinary cases appealed at the parish courts in the second instance, and ruled on them. The presiding judge

was the dean. Among its members are ex-officio and elected (6 church and 6 secular) council judges and the diocese prosecutor.

The inspection body of the diocese was the *visitation*, which visited once every three years, or even several times a year, if necessary. Due to its territorial extent, the diocese was divided into three visitation regions. Due to the rotation system, the inspection of the congregations was solved with annual reports. The visit usually lasted a week. There were cases when the committee was separated into two and visited this way. The composition of the committee was also very diverse, but in addition to the chairman, an accountant had to be present. Secular representatives rarely showed up for the visitation. The dean's parish was examined in the presence of the chief registrar and the chief guardian. It happened several times that two parishes were checked per day. The scenarios for the morning and afternoon church visits were slightly different. In case of the first, the reception was followed by a service and presbytery meeting. The investigation followed, that was the final point of the visitation. The afternoon visit began with a reception and worship, which was followed by a presbytery meeting and examination. There was made a record of the visitation. In the last part of the chapter, we presented the diocese officials and their attributions, beginning from the dean to the form handler. In their case, we can conclude that the terminology of the time does not call the officials as officials by chance: they were paid for their work.

Overall, we can say that the structure of the Reformed Diocese of Mureş followed the requirements of church laws. However, the diocese regulations issued in 1915 made it unique in this respect. Due to its territorial extent, it was characterised by unique features. It had three visitation, two school inspection and also two auditing regions. By introducing the home mission program – for better transparency – two home mission committees were also set. Accordingly, this dual order operated until the division of the diocese in 1927.

The *third chapter* presents the general visitation. Church laws prescribed the general visitation, which the bishop had to exercise once a year. Before the examined period, the last time the diocese had a general visitation was in 1872. For this reason, we briefly summarised the process during which the city congregations (including Tîrgu-Mureş) became places of episcopal investigation.

In the period between the two world wars, bishop Károly Nagy was the one who planned first to visit the congregations of the diocese. The visitation was canceled because of his death. After the division of the diocese, bishop Sándor Makkai visited twice (in 1927 and 1928).

The preparations for the general visitation were managed by the leadership of the diocese. As a first step, the dean's visitation was held in the respective region, during which the congregations were prepared for the bishop's visit. The bishopric was also informed about the situation of the congregations.

The schedule finalised by the parish included the sequence of visits, the celebrations announced by the parishes (laying of foundation stone, consecration of church/bell/school) and the workprogram of the visitation. The dean also ruled on the duties of the parishes, on the accommodation and meals. The final program was also sent to the parishes.

The visitation committee was made up of the representatives of the parishes and the of the diocese. Besides the bishop, the head recorder, the general director, the auditor of the parish, the educational speaker, the legal advisor and the bishop's secretary were also present at the two visits. The diocese was represented by the dean, the head recorder and the head curator.

The committee was received in each parish – according to the predetermined order – in a ceremonial setting by the representatives of the state authorities and the leadership of the parish. Depending on the schedule, there were morning and afternoon visits almost every day. In both cases, the investigation was followed by a church service, the reception of the officials and the presbytery meeting. After that, the bishop made official visits or took part in festive events and receptions.

During the services, the committee members served alternately, and the bishop said a prayer and a blessing each time. As part of the ceremony, church buildings and church supplies were consecrated, baptism could also be part of the worship. These kind of events were scheduled for this exceptional occasion.

The focus of the general visitation was the church inspection. As part of this, the committee checked the religious life, school affairs, financial condition and office management of the congregations. At the same time, the members of the committee held sessions, meetings, and presentations that were intended to promote the home mission activities of the congregations. The results of the investigation were presented at the presbytery meeting. The minute of the visitation was also made, this document recorded every moment of the visit.

In conclusion, we can say that the general visitation had a strengthening and stimulating role despite the spectacular setting. In many cases, he confronted the leaders of the church and the members of the congregation with their mistakes and omissions. Despite this, it rarely aroused

dislike. In addition to orders and instructions, it looked for solutions to eliminate errors and gave guidance. Pastoral reports on the impact of the visitation also support this. However, we must state that the positive impact of the general visitation could not be maintained in the long run.

The *fourth chapter* deals with church administration. The administrative affairs of the Diocese of Mureş can be said to have been multi-layered issues. The most far-reaching case was the division of the diocese into two, since the administration of the diocese became more and more difficult due to its large territorial extent. This finally happened in 1927. In this period, only three mother parishes were established on its territory, and three new pastor positions opened. This indicates the weakness of the subsidies. On the other hand, the number of vacant pastor and teacher positions was very high and filling them was a constant problem. The vacancies were mostly due to financial problems. The congregations could not or maybe did not even want to provide their pastors and teachers an adequate living. They tried to solve the vulnerability of the pastors by introducing *dislocation*. The high personal movement within the diocese is also shown by the number of incorporations. The support of widows, orphans and retired people also caused significant problems, primarily due to pension and guardianship arrears.

Regarding the order of worship, the focus of the study was the observance or non-observance of Sunday, holiday and weekday services. At the same time, an important issue was the consequence of the *worship reform* introduced in 1933. Despite the dean's efforts to unify, the reform divided the congregations of the diocese. The renewal of the practice of confirmation, however, resulted in a positive shift.

Regarding religious life, we can state that moral decadence was experienced in many congregations. Primarily in the settlements where more religions lived together, there were practiced customs contrary to the Reformed teachings (lighting, pilgrimages, house consecration). Due to mixed marriages, the number of defectors was high. The influence of the sects was also significant in some areas.

In order to renew the spiritual life of the church, the parish developed and introduced a home mission program. Among the diverse activities, Sunday school, children and family services, Bible-study groups, religious evenings and readings were more successful. The club and associative activities introduced later had varying results. Among them, the women's clubs was the most effective, primarily in the field of orphan and poor care. The activities of youth associations (IKE) and men's associations were soon banned by the state authorities. Within the

framework of the home mission programs, a number of conferences were organised in the diocese, in which the main emphasis was placed on staff and leadership training.

Regarding administration it can be stated that the decisions made by the diocese in this area was beneficent for the parishes and congregations, since their goal was the smooth and regulated functioning of the services and the growth of the spiritual life of the congregations.

In the *fifth chapter*, we deal with the affairs of the diocese court. The disciplinary institution of the diocese was the court. Despite this, the diocese council tried to solve the complaints received by the dean's office. If, during the procedure, it established an offense against church laws, the case was transferred to the diocese court.

Church laws classified court cases into two large groups: *administrative court cases* and *disciplinary cases*.

In the incomplete archival documents of the diocese for the examined period, we identified 25 administrative court cases and 38 disciplinary cases, although we know that there were much more cases than 63.

Among the administrative court cases in this period, those related to elections, salaries and property management were typical. Complaints against the elections were always based on a person or group dissatisfied with the elected pastor, teacher or curator, who wanted to assert their own will. In case of violations of the rules that arose during the investigation, the results of the elections were annulled. However, the rate of irregular elections was neglectable. In most of the lawsuits related to salaries, the parish did not comply with its obligations set in the pastor's, teacher's, and cantor's salary sheet. Church members accumulated huge arrears and refused to pay them off. They rebelled against the payment of arrears or made unfounded complaints and accusations against the pastor and the teacher. The majority of disciplinary cases were also the consequence of the above causes. Most of the cases concerning fraudulent asset management were based on well-founded accusations. Church employees causing material damage were punished depending on the extent of the damage.

Disciplinary proceedings were initiated on base of a complaint and ex officio. In this case, there were distinguished four target groups. Pastors, teachers and curators were punished for dereliction of duty and non-compliance with the orders of higher church authorities. In the case of presbyters and collective cases, the court punished for instigation and anti-church attitude. The



penalties imposed were also wide-ranged. In addition to reprimands, disapproval and fines, dismissal from the official position also occurred in several cases. Presbyteries were generally suspended or abolished. In case of unfounded accusations, the defendant was acquitted, but there were cases when the parties managed to reconcile with each other.

In most of the cases, the convicts filed an appeal against the court decision. We consider a big shortcoming that because of lack of resources, we were not always able to follow the outcome of the appeal, but considering the few examples, the parish court only confirmed the diocese's decision.

Overall, we can state that the diocese court operated efficiently and prudently during the examined period. All the more so, because during this difficult period, the often unworthy behavior of church officials and employees, as well as of church members, and the issues of controversy that arose towards the church and among each other had to be kept within the appropriate frame.

The *last chapter* contains school matters. In this chapter, we presented the Reformed denominational education between the two world wars. Public education, which has its roots in the 15th century, meant public education and elite training in the Reformed church. At that time teachers did not perform their duties as their profession. Beginning from the 18th century, the churches also claimed their work. The order of public education was regulated by secular and church laws.

At the turn of the 20th century, the Diocese of Mureș had an extensive network of religious schools. As a result of the World War I and the new power system, religious education suffered significant damage and was transformed under the influence of constraint.

During the transition period that last until 1920, the abuse of the Romanian leadership had already begun. At that time the administrators of the schools sought to compensate the damage suffered, education was suspended in many places because of epidemics and military administration.

After 1920, the Romanian political leadership intensified its efforts to abolish the Hungarian school network. As result of the land reform, the churches lost a significant part of their property, the income of which was previously used for education as well. The Romanian state made decisions that affected teachers and religious education in a negative way. The teachers were forced to take an oath and pass a Romanian language exam. All support was withdrawn from them. In 1922, the church introduced the universal church tax to maintain education and to ensure

teachers' living. This aroused considerable dislike among church members. The issue of teachers' salaries determined the entire period, since the leadership of the diocese struggled with a huge budget deficit throughout the 1920s and 1930s due to the insolvency of the parishes. Despite the Romanian curriculum introduced in 1923, the actions of the revisors, and the repeated resistance and indifference of church members, religious education remained functional and sometimes presented excellent results.

Based on the chapters of the thesis, we formulated the following conclusions:

1. The structure of the diocese followed the line defined by Transylvanian church laws. Unlike the order in Hungary, it was not based on the principle of double presidency (dean-head curator/deputy curator), but preserved the head status of the dean. The president of all the institutions of the diocese (general assembly, council, court) was the dean. His deputy is the head recorder. The diocese had unique regulations defining its own internal order. The officials were paid for their service, this is why they were consistently referred to as officials during this period.

2. The general visitation did not simply mean the compulsory visit of the bishop. In the period between the two world wars, it was much more of spiritual support and practicality. In many cases, the visitation initiated home mission activities in the 224 churches visited (women's club, Sunday school). An important result was the situation report made following the visitation, which was done by the pastors after the visitation. These showed how the congregations felt about the visitation and about the activities of the committee.

3. The division of the diocese into two relieved the leadership of the diocese. It provided a better insight into the spiritual life of the congregations, which was quite malleable in this period. In many cases, the sensitive borderline between the spiritual renewal provided by home mission activities and traditions was crossed in both directions. The interaction between the Reformed communities and other religious groups was very clearly defined. The failure to unify the liturgy reform did not have a good effect on the congregations of the diocese.

4. The diocese council had the power of an administrative court. It adjudicated cases of smaller volume and did not transfer them to the administrative court. However, in disciplinary matters it only made suggestions. A good number of disciplinary cases were caused by the universal tax and the denial of the priests' and teachers' salaries. Collective punishments were also their result. Most of the disciplinary cases concerned the presbyters, but in several cases the court

condemned pastors and teachers as well. Because of lack of resources, we were unable to follow the results of appeals.

5. Religious education was one of the foundations for the survival of Hungarian Reformed communities. Despite of the state's efforts to liquidate it, it was able to provide education in Hungarian language. The universal church tax introduced for its maintenance showed the financial possibilities of the Reformed congregations and their attitude towards education. In many cases, it could not understand teacher's situation, so it was somehow indolent towards them. Though being in a difficult situation the society of teachers was still able to present outstanding results. The management of the diocese could not eliminate the severe financial situation that had arisen.