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ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGES IN THE UNITARIAN CHURCH AND IN THE TASKS OF THE MINISTERS

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION
ABSTRACT

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Introduction

The subject of this dissertation is the transformation of Protestant pastoral roles, specifically the changes that have taken place over the past three decades among ministers serving within the organizational framework of the Unitarian Church. My point of departure is that pastoral roles are not static or fixed, but rather evolve under the influence of both external (historical, social, and institutional) and internal (theological and psychological) factors.

This study addresses the issue on three analytical levels: from the perspective of broad societal transformations that influence the conditions and possibilities of the religious subsystem; at the level of the church organization, which attempts to realize its aims at the intersection of institutional objectives and the operative leeway of the religious subsystem; and through the lens of how ministers themselves understand their pastoral vocation—an understanding shaped by social environment, institutional expectations, and theological tradition.

The Church does not function – or, in ecclesiastical language, fulfills its mission – outside the world but within society. Religion, as a subsystem of a differentiated society, exists in constant interaction with its broader social context. Social changes naturally determine or influence the forms in which religion manifests, as well as the scope of action available to religious organizations and the individual or collective actors operating within them. For this reason, transformations in various social subsystems directly shape the functioning of religious institutions and the margin of action available to religious actors. From this perspective, institutional transformation and changes in pastoral roles may be interpreted as responses to broader societal change.

Although the primary focus of the dissertation is the transformation of pastoral roles, it is essential to also address the organizational framework within which these changes occur, as this framework both formally structures and facilitates them. Accordingly, I analyze how the institutional transformation of the church—its efforts to adapt to social change, along with the expectations and structural forms that stem from both universal church mission and local (congregational) needs—influences the development and transformation of pastoral roles.

The study also explores how ministers themselves perceive their vocation. Changes in pastoral roles are not solely driven by external societal factors or institutional norms and expectations, but are also shaped by the ministers' self-understanding and their personal vision of vocation, as autonomous individuals engaged in a calling.

The relevance of the topic lies in the social transformations that have, since the 1989 regime change, brought churches, religious denominations, and ecclesiastical institutions in Romania back into public prominence. These institutions were granted the opportunity to expand their areas of activity—developments that may be interpreted in terms of religious revitalization and desecularization in Romania. At the same time, these transformations can be situated within broader demographic, economic, and more recently, digital and social media-related developments. In addition to liturgical functions, churches were able to strengthen their missionary, educational, and community-building roles; they reopened their educational institutions, founded ecclesiastical and professional organizations, undertook institutional development, and expanded human resources training. Alongside these opportunities for institutional growth and social engagement, churches have also faced challenges posed by social, economic, cultural, and technological change. In the last decade and a half, such challenges have demanded responses from actors of the religious subsystem. Within this process, clergy have emerged as key figures who, at the congregational level, often responded to change with individual creativity—within the limits of the institutional framework.

A second aspect is both personal and professional. As a minister of the analyzed denomination, I am regularly confronted with the impact of social and environmental change on pastoral work and church organization. Both in my immediate surroundings and on a broader level, I observe the ways in which members of the pastoral community and ecclesiastical institutions seek to address the challenges that arise in fulfilling the church's mission. I find it particularly compelling to examine how ministers—who enjoy a relatively broad degree of professional autonomy—create new forms of service in their places of ministry, despite the slow-moving nature of an ecclesiastical structure characterized by historical rigidity. Over time, these innovations may be integrated into broader church practice.

This dissertation approaches the subject primarily from a sociological perspective, employing the methodology and tools of the social sciences while also drawing upon theoretical insights from historiography, psychology, and theology. The study is based on both qualitative and quantitative research methods.

The dissertation is structured in two main parts. The first part provides the theoretical foundation, synthesizing relevant literature on religious change, pastoral roles, and organizational transformation. The second part presents the empirical research, its findings, and conclusions. The first chapter of the theoretical section—*The Changed Social Context of Churches: Three Decades of Social Transformation in Transylvania*—offers an overview of post-1989 social changes and their impact on religious life, ecclesiastical structures, and pastoral activity. The subsection titled *Theoretical Framework on Religious and Pastoral Role Change* examines the research topic within the frameworks of secularization, individualization of religion, and desecularization, offering a brief overview of the main characteristics of religious change in Romania and situating it within its relevant historical and social context—particularly its implications for the Unitarian Church, a historical denomination operating in a minority context in Romania. The following subsection, *Theories on Pastoral Roles*, provides a synthesis of scholarly literature on clerical roles, applying role theory to the concept of pastoral vocation and offering a conceptualization of pastoral roles. This section also outlines the theoretical framework related to ecclesiastical organizations.

The empirical section of the dissertation begins with Chapter 3, which describes in detail the research object and applied methodology. This is followed by a presentation of the organizational structure of the Unitarian Church. After two subsections providing historical and theological overviews, the paper presents a historical analysis of the church's organizational and governance forms, using content analysis methods. Chapter 4, *The Historical Development of Unitarian Pastoral Roles*, investigates institutional expectations concerning pastoral roles from both a historical and regulatory perspective. Chapter 5, *Analysis of Pastoral Roles in Light of Social Change*, summarizes the results of interviews conducted with Unitarian ministers currently serving in congregations. Chapter 6 presents the quantitative research conducted among the entire Unitarian ministerial population. The penultimate chapter discusses pastoral role typologies developed on the basis of the empirical data. The final chapter presents the conclusions, offering a synthesis of the research findings.

The Changed Social Context of Churches in Transylvania

The social and economic reconfiguration of post-communist Romania has had profound consequences for churches, and particularly for pastoral roles. The political transition after 1989 was followed by a complex economic transformation. In 1990, the majority of the population was still socialized within rural cultural patterns (Csedő et al., 2004), a fact also

reflected in its relationship to the church. In the decades following the regime change, the collapse of industrial structures led to drastic unemployment and a massive return to agriculture—a process referred to in the scholarly literature as "forced re-peasantization" (Borsos & György, 1999; Kiss, 2005; Szilágyi, 2020). This return to agriculture rarely offered a sustainable alternative, often leading to large-scale external migration and producing patterns of temporary or permanent migration nationwide (Horváth & Anghel, 2009; Horváth, 2023). Among the Hungarian population in Transylvania, migration began earlier and was oriented mainly toward Hungary, resulting in a faster aging and decline of the population (Veres, 2023).

This demographic decline is particularly critical in rural areas, where church communities often represent the only remaining institutional framework, and ministers—besides fulfilling their traditional roles—are increasingly burdened with community organizing, administrative, and social responsibilities. Congregation members are physically dispersed: many live abroad but maintain ties with their local church, creating new types of "long-distance relationships" and requiring a reconfiguration of the pastoral role.

Another important dimension of social change is cultural transformation. Romania has transitioned from a shortage economy to a consumer society, accompanied by lifestyle changes (Pásztor, 2023). Increased mobility has introduced a new logic of organizing daily life, which is also evident in religious life: participation in worship services and community engagement are often limited by lack of time. The spread of the internet has a similar effect: believers, living in information bubbles, often question pastoral competence (Nichols, 2017; Tőkés, 2011; 2023). Managing digital communication spaces requires new skills and time resources, further increasing the complexity of the pastoral role.

The generational gap is also widening: as technological change accelerates, older people are increasingly excluded from digital culture, while young people develop new identities and religious attitudes (Dániel et al., 2016). Ministers must maintain relationships with several generations simultaneously, adding another level of complexity to their work.

The social structure has also undergone fundamental change: the dominant classes of the socialist regime—industrial workers and peasants—have gradually disintegrated. The structural and technological reconfiguration of the agricultural population has led to the disappearance of traditional congregational leadership elites (Borsos–György, 1999; Oláh, 2017), making the renewal of church decision-making bodies more difficult (Kiss, 2025). A large portion of the industrial working class has been marginalized as a result of deindustrialization, their social status weakened, and opportunities for mobility diminished. Job market insecurity and the spread of "black" or "grey" labour affect the stability of

ecclesiastical presence (Péter, 2003; 2011). The emerging new middle class is based more on education than on wealth and lives largely on wages; Protestant clergy can be included in this category (Urse, 2004). The social prestige of ministers has declined, especially in rural areas, where discrepancies between expected living standards and local living conditions often generate tensions.

In conclusion, the social processes of the three decades following the regime change—economic transformations, migration, cultural and digital shifts, and the reconfiguration of social stratification—have profoundly reshaped the operational environment of churches and, in particular, of ministers. In addition to traditional sacred, pastoral counselling, and teaching roles, there is an increasingly strong set of expectations in the areas of administration, mediation, and digital communication, making a structural reconsideration of the pastoral vocation necessary.

Theoretical Foundation of the Research
Presentation of the Theoretical Framework on Religious Change and the Transformation of Pastoral Roles

The topic of my thesis can be understood within the context of social change. Religious institutions and actors operate within a given historical and social environment (economic, cultural, political, and legal). The processes, functioning, and transformations of this environment naturally determine the opportunities that shape the scope of action of religious institutions and actors. Thus, the activities of religious institutions and their representatives can be described, analyzed, and explained within the framework of contemporary social transformations.

In this part of the thesis, I examine sociological theoretical approaches that explain, in general terms, the evolution of religiosity—particularly in Europe—and the relationship between religion and society, as well as the functioning of religious institutions.

The broader theoretical foundation of the dissertation is provided by the functionalist paradigm (Luhmann, 1984), the secularization thesis (Dobbelaere, 2002), and the theory of religious desecularization (Berger, 1999; Karpov, 2010). These frameworks highlight the functioning of the religious subsystem and contribute to understanding how external processes generate change at the level of religious institutions and actors.

From the perspective of the functionalist paradigm, society is composed of distinct yet interdependent subsystems whose function is to maintain social equilibrium. The role of the religious subsystem is to preserve shared values and meanings, and to foster community integration. In response to social transformations, religious institutions and organizations adapt to new challenges, reinterpret their roles, and, when necessary, expand them, thereby ensuring the continued fulfilment of the subsystem's functions.

According to the secularization thesis, modernization leads to the gradual weakening of religion's influence in differentiated societies, which also implies a reduction in the role of religious institutions. This process is accompanied by the privatization of belief and religiosity, confining them to the private sphere of life. Religious explanations are replaced by scientific–rational ones, affecting religion's capacity to define social norms. At the same time, there is an increased demand for spiritual support and for more informal, relaxed forms of community (Casanova, 1994; Davis, 1994).

Karel Dobbelaere (2002) analyzes secularization on three levels: Macro-level: Religion loses its regulatory role in society as social subsystems—according to systems theory—become autonomous from religious norms. Meso-level: Religious organizations adapt to social changes by rationalizing, bureaucratizing, and becoming part of a competitive religious market (Weber, 1992). Micro-level: Religiosity becomes a matter of personal choice, losing its normative character, yet continuing to exist in individualized forms (Máté-Tóth, 2014). Secularization is therefore not a uniform process but a differentiated and reversible one.

The theory of desecularization asserts that, as a result of certain social and political processes, religion can regain its influence over society as a whole. The causes of this phenomenon lie partly in the emerging religious pluralism of modern societies, and partly in local cultural and religious identity policies that support the reassertion of religion in the public sphere (Berger, 1999).

The 1989 regime change in Romania triggered profound transformations in both religiosity and ecclesiastical institutions. Following the anti-religious policies of the communist regime, a religious revitalization took place, manifesting not only in increased religious practice but also in the expanded social presence of churches. This development challenges the universal validity of secularization theories and justifies the application of desecularization models.

From the perspective of systems theory, religion as a social subsystem gained an expanded sphere of action. On the one hand, its functions of meaning-making and norm-setting have been reinforced; on the other, religion has acquired new symbolic presence in other social

spheres (e.g., political decision-making, cultural and community integration). However, the influence of religious norms is often indirect, manifesting as cultural identity in political decision-making and public policy formation (Kiss, 2020).

Alongside the reinterpretation of the Orthodox Church's role in the process of national integration, the Hungarian historical churches have regained an important function in supporting minority identity. This is particularly significant in the self-identification processes of ethnic minorities—including the Hungarian community—where religious and national identity reinforce one another (Gereben & Tomka, 2000).

The social involvement of churches has expanded: they are active in education (religion classes, denominational schools), in social care (orphanages, elderly care), and in the media. These integration efforts often operate according to the instrumental rationality of the sector in which they are undertaken: religious actors must conform to state regulations and professional expectations. This affects the functioning of ecclesiastical institutions and generates new types of adaptation pressures (Kiss, 2020).

In crossing the boundaries between social systems, religion cannot always maintain its autonomy: there is a visible reconfiguration of functions at the symbolic level—religion reappears in previously secularized domains but cannot shape them according to its own logic. In this sense, desecularization can be interpreted not as a full functional return, but rather as a cultural one (Kiss, 2020).

The specific situation of the Hungarian historical churches in Transylvania illustrates well the institutionalized possibilities of desecularization. The institutional model proposed by Kiss (2020) describes this role across four dimensions: Territorial coverage: The presence of churches encompasses virtually the entire Hungarian population, especially in rural areas. Depth of social reach: The institutional integration of churches often surpasses the efficiency of state administration, particularly in rural regions. Institutional autonomy: Through their distinct legal status, churches possess decision-making rights and the capacity to allocate resources. Multifunctionality: The religious subsystem is organically connected to educational, social, cultural, sports, and civic spheres, participating actively in their functioning and even in resource distribution.

Within the functionalist–structuralist framework, an analysis of the pastoral role reveals that the post-1989 context has expanded the social responsibilities of religious leaders. Ministers are no longer confined to strictly religious services (liturgy, sacraments, preaching) but also contribute to the construction of political, social, and cultural community life. This generates new role expectations and competency requirements.

Institutional Transformation

The analysis of the institutional environment in this dissertation is based on the neo-institutionalist theory. This theoretical approach does not focus exclusively on institutional structures, but also takes into account the cultural, social, and symbolic factors that influence organizational decisions and forms. From this perspective, religious organizations do not base their decisions and functioning solely on rationality; rather, they are largely influenced by social expectations, by recognized and legitimate operational models within their environment, and by the desire to resemble other established and successful organizations. This process is referred to as isomorphism, meaning the tendency toward homogenization (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

The concept of isomorphism refers to the fact that organizations, in the process of adapting to their environment, acquire similar structural and functional characteristics. DiMaggio and Powell identified three types of isomorphism: Coercive isomorphism, which arises as a result of external, administrative, political, or legal pressures (for example, religious organizations implement restructuring in order to comply with state requirements); Mimetic isomorphism, which involves adopting successful models from other institutions in contexts of uncertainty (for example, religious organizations adopt organizational development techniques from other denominations or NGOs); Normative isomorphism, which manifests through professionalization (uniform training and common standards), whereby religious organizations harmonize their professional expectations, standards, and training systems.

This theoretical approach is useful for analyzing how religious organizations, including churches, respond to changes in the social environment, construct their legitimacy, and integrate into the institutional field. The theory provides an adequate framework for interpreting transformations in ecclesiastical organizations, especially with regard to processes of bureaucratization and professionalization—namely, the institutionalization of competence and specialization (Chaves, 1996; Beckford, 2003).

Churches in Transylvania, although compelled to adapt to the expectations of the social environment, also seek to preserve their traditional functions of community integration and value conservation. The Hungarian historical churches in Transylvania—including the Unitarian Church—function as organizations that carry the religious, cultural, and national identity of a historical minority. In their case, isomorphism occurs only partially. For example, church administrative structures are adapted to the regulations of the Romanian state (such as accounting requirements), yet these frameworks are reinterpreted and applied in ways that

preserve their own legal and spiritual norms (for instance, maintaining the use of the Hungarian language in accounting, employing their own ecclesiastical terminology for records, etc.).

Synthesis of Theoretical Approaches to Pastoral Roles

The interpretation of pastoral vocation and its associated roles is closely tied to institutional, social, theological, and identity-related factors, which constantly generate changes in both expectations and the exercise of these roles. Because pastoral roles are socially embedded, they are simultaneously shaped by the structure of religious organizations, social norms, and individual self-understanding.

Pastoral vocation encompasses a complex system of roles, historically and socially rooted. The identity and self-concept of a religious leader are not static; rather, they evolve continuously, reflecting changes in the social, cultural, and organizational environment.

Role theory examines how roles are formed and how they evolve. In society, individuals hold multiple roles simultaneously, each associated with specific norms and expectations. The premise of role theory is that roles can be learned and shaped through social interactions. The evolution of a role is determined by the individual's social position, and its periodic reinterpretation occurs in response both to social (collective) feedback and to personal interpretation.

The pastoral role is multi-layered: it is determined by the expectations of the religious institution (linked to its functions: preaching, officiating), by congregational reflection (spiritual care), by the demands of the social environment (e.g., community organizing, cultural dimensions), as well as by personal interpretation. It is, therefore, a multidimensional role. The vision of pastoral vocation is not based exclusively on theological foundations but also includes psychological, cultural, organizational, and political dimensions (Goffman, 1959).

This section of the thesis presents the various strands of role theory and their relevance to understanding the pastoral role, with particular emphasis on Bruce J. Biddle's synthesizing model and the foundations of organizational role theory.

Roles manifest in norms, behavioral patterns, and social expectations, which develop partly in institutionalized settings and partly in interpersonal relationships. The pastoral role illustrates this complexity well: it encompasses formal dimensions (liturgical, administrative), informal ones (community building, counseling), and personal ones (commitment, vocational consciousness). Bruce J. Biddle (1987; 2013) developed an interdisciplinary approach that integrates different directions of role theory. According to him, a role is not simply an individual choice but a socially determined construct that takes shape at the intersection of

structural dimensions (e.g., church regulations), cognitive dimensions (mental representations), and interactional dimensions (relationship with parishioners). In this model, the pastoral role is a relational role: it can be understood only in the context of the relationship with both the congregation and the institution.

Biddle's theory also allows for the empirical investigation of the dynamic, conflictual, and contextually variable nature of roles. Key concepts in his system include: role conflict – occurs when the individual faces divergent or contradictory expectations; Role conflicts may take the following forms: role incompatibility – when two or more roles come into conflict and prove mutually irreconcilable; role ambiguity – when the expectations associated with a role are unclear or inconsistent; role overload – when an individual is burdened with too many or excessively demanding role expectations. Based on these concepts, the pastoral role can be analyzed at the structural-institutional level (church regulations), the interactional level (community expectations), and the psychological level (inner commitment and personal identity).

Organizational role theory (Katz & Kahn, 1978) interprets roles in the context of formal organizations. The church, as an institution, is a hierarchically structured organization in which the minister holds a position defined to achieve institutional objectives. This role is formal (e.g., preaching, administration), specialized (linked to the church's mission), and normative (regulated by the fundamental law and internal regulations). The theory emphasizes that roles are: predefined – determined by formalized expectations; hierarchical – linked to specific positions (e.g., assistant pastor, dean, bishop); functionally specialized – assigned to specific goals and functions; conflict-bearing – due to tensions between organizational logic and individual identity.

This approach is particularly relevant for clergy, as within the ecclesiastical organization, formal expectations frequently intersect with informal ones from the community and with the demands of personal vocational conscience. This triple source of expectations often generates role conflicts, ambiguity, and overload. The pastor is simultaneously a leader, servant, administrator, teacher, and spiritual guide—roles originating from different, often contradictory, sources.

The pastoral role is, therefore, not merely a functional position but a multi-layered social construct, contextually formed. Both the theoretical framework provided by Biddle and the organizational role theory contribute to an empirical approach to the changes, tensions, and identity effects associated with the pastoral role. The interplay of institutional expectations,

community norms, and personal vocational vision leads to a complex, often ambivalent, conception of the role.

This complexity is also well illustrated by the theoretical approach proposed by Blizzard (1985), which offers a detailed typology for understanding the vocational image and pastoral practice. In this research, alongside Biddle's model, Blizzard's concept serves as a fundamental reference point for analyzing pastoral roles in the Unitarian context. According to Blizzard (1985), the pastoral vocation can be interpreted in terms of two main orientations: ideological (theological) and functional. The former defines the pastor as a servant of God and bearer of the divine message, embodying the expectations of the religious community in line with church teachings—this not only shapes the role but also contributes to the formation of pastoral identity. The functional model, by contrast, describes the pastoral role in terms of context-dependent practical tasks: the pastor appears as a spiritual caregiver, organizer, and community leader. The two models are not mutually exclusive—they are often present simultaneously.

Blizzard treats the vocational image as a dependent variable shaped by personal factors (age, experience, personality, career path) and by the institutional context (denomination, type of congregation, community expectations). His empirical research shows that clergy at the beginning of their careers tend to be more ideologically oriented, while those with more experience adopt a functional orientation (Blizzard, 1985; Bálint, 2023).

In shaping the vocational image, self-reflection, personal values, and the relationship with community expectations play an important role. Siba (2016), following Klessmann, identifies four formative factors: Christian tradition, theological and psychological perspective, community context, and personal faith. Discrepancies between the vocational image and self-image can generate conflicts that reduce pastoral satisfaction (Székely, 2018; Siba, 2016).

In Blizzard's approach, integrative orientations play a central role, structuring how pastors organize their activity. These may be traditional (e.g., devout-saint, scholar, sacramentalist) or secular (e.g., social promoter, mediator, educator). The discrepancy between the preferred role and the actual role performed also generates tensions (Blizzard, 1985). Blizzard describes pastoral practice in six types: preacher, teacher, priest, organizer, administrator, and spiritual counselor. These can be grouped into three categories: traditional (e.g., priest), neo-traditional (e.g., spiritual counselor), and contemporary (e.g., administrator), the latter often lacking a solid theological foundation and requiring specific training processes.

In conclusion, Protestant pastoral identity is frequently marked by role conflicts: alongside the roles of teacher, prophet, and priest, administrative and organizational tasks have

become essential components. Current challenges in the social and ecclesiastical environment are redefining pastoral roles, leading to their increasing tension and complexity.

Methodology and Analytical Techniques

The research focuses on the activities of Unitarian ministers serving within the Hungarian Unitarian Church. The empirical part of the study includes an analytical description of the organizational characteristics of the church, an examination of the institutional conditions under which ministers carry out their work at the basic organizational units of the church, as well as a description of changes in ministerial roles.

Both quantitative and qualitative methods are used in the research. Given the complexity of the phenomenon and the topic, a specific combination of sociological methods is applied, in practice adapting the technique of triangulation to achieve the research objectives.

Thus, to contextualize the phenomenon within a broader framework, a document analysis (content analysis) is carried out regarding church-related sources. In order to obtain an overall picture, the sociological questionnaire method is also used, providing statistical data on ministers' attitudes and opinions regarding organizational changes, as well as the factors they consider relevant to the evolution of ministerial roles in response to social change. By applying standardized questionnaires, the study aims to identify reference points for established ministerial roles in order to describe and typologize them. The survey method targets the entire population of ministers, on an exhaustive basis.

In addition, to capture emerging themes from the "hard" data obtained through the survey method and to better understand and interpret the relationships between explanatory and dependent variables, "soft" data are also collected: the semi-structured interview method is applied, conducting in-depth interviews with ministers. These are supplemented by informal discussions.

Finally, to frame these data also from an anthropological perspective, additional "soft" data are incorporated from the position of participant observer—considering that I have been a practicing minister for almost twenty-five years and have held leadership positions within the church for several years.

I certify that throughout the data collection process I strictly adhered to the applicable ethical norms, in particular the ESOMAR standards and GDPR provisions. The collected data, as well as the confidentiality and security of respondents, are guaranteed and protected by the

legislation in force, in accordance with Directive 95/46/EC, transposed by Law No. 677/2001, and Directive 2002/58/EC, transposed by Law No. 506/2004.

Moreover, in planning the research, I sought to contribute to sustainability and to protect the environment through the responsible use of resources. Consequently, in the spirit of ecological awareness and in order to minimize the carbon footprint, the use of paper-based materials was kept to a minimum.

Main data sources analyzed are as follows.

The organizational evolution of the church is examined through content analysis of historical and legal church documents, as well as strategic documents. The fundamental laws of the church (1942, 1949, 1996, 2002, 2012) and the Organizational and Operational Regulations (2012), the Strategic Plan of the Hungarian Unitarian Church for 2011–2015, and documents from various supervisory authorities are analyzed. The same procedure is applied to identify institutional expectations regarding Unitarian ministerial roles.

Phases of ministerial activity research:

Phase 1: Expert interviews were conducted with senior officials of the Hungarian Unitarian Church and a focus group discussion was held with 5 Unitarian ministers. This exploratory phase addressed the following topics: (1) definition of ministerial roles; (2) preaching activity; (3) liturgical activity; (4) spiritual counseling; (5) teaching (catechetical) activities; (6) community organization; (7) administrative duties. For each topic, the emphasis was on identifying changes perceived by ministers in these areas of activity. Audio recordings of the discussions were transcribed and coded according to the main themes, and the analysis was structured in line with the interview guide topics.

Phase 2: A questionnaire survey was conducted, based on the preceding qualitative research, focusing on the above-listed areas of ministerial activity. This survey measured the frequency and other characteristics of various ministerial roles and activities using quantitative methods. Bivariate analyses and hierarchical cluster analyses were applied to segment the targeted population and provide an analytical description based on relevant criteria. The online questionnaire, implemented on the LimeSurvey platform, was sent to all parish ministers of the Hungarian Unitarian Church in November 2024, with data collection completed in February 2025. The dataset contains 94 valid cases, representing 85% of the studied population.

Phase 3: In order to address questions that arose from interpreting the survey results, a new round of qualitative data collection was undertaken. In this phase, structured interviews were conducted with an additional 15 Unitarian ministers. These interviews explored the institutional, community, and social expectations perceived by ministers regarding their

vocation, role conflicts, and the impact of social change on ministerial activity. This qualitative research complements and explains the results of the quantitative survey.

The analysis of ministerial roles was carried out in three stages: first, through the above-mentioned content analysis of historical and legal church documents; second, by processing the results of both qualitative and quantitative research; and finally, by incorporating data collected in the capacity of participant observer.

Conclusions

In the closing section of the dissertation, within the conclusions, I formulate detailed and reasoned answers to the research questions in order to present the main findings and conclusions of the investigation.

Regarding the first research question (*How has the organizational functioning of the Unitarian Church changed since the regime change, and in what ways has this transformation influenced the tasks, roles, and institutional scope of action of parish ministers?*), the research has outlined the following answers:

On the one hand, the organizational structure of the Unitarian Church has been gradually transformed and expanded after 1989: a hierarchical structure, organized across various ecclesiastical levels, based on committee principles and representativeness, has adapted to modern legal, social, and administrative requirements. It can be said that the Church has modernized, meaning that structural differentiation, organizational rationalization, and bureaucratization have been achieved. The institutional organization has integrated both traditional and new domains—education, media, social assistance, culture, science, and international relations—while also strengthening community participation. The three-tiered organizational system—parish, deanery/district, general church—is based on the synodal-presbyterian principle and the principle of subsidiarity, ensuring a decentralized decision-making system operating on representative foundations.

On the other hand, an important milestone in institutional change came in 2012, through the reunification of the church bodies from Transylvania and Hungary, which led to the formation of the unified Hungarian Unitarian Church. The ecclesiastical structure, adapted to the modern legal and social environment, increasingly relies on specialized competencies as well as administrative and strategic planning. In this way, the Church has clearly entered the institutional sphere defined by modern legal, social, and administrative functioning. Its adaptation to this sphere—according to the neo-institutionalist theory of DiMaggio and Powell (1983)—has occurred through various forms of isomorphism. Forms of coercive

isomorphism (as a response to compliance with state regulations), normative isomorphism (through professionalization), and mimetic isomorphism (through the adoption of effective operational models from secular organizations) can be observed. These processes describe an organizational development in which the religious community preserves its shared religious identity while being able to respond to both the challenges of modern society and the expectations of the state institutional environment as well as those of the community.

Finally, the transformation of the church's institutional system after 2012 has also brought structural and functional changes to clerical ministry: the degree of regulation, the proportion of administrative and specialized tasks, and the weight of formal expectations and controls have all increased. Clerical identity can no longer be understood solely as a spiritual calling, but rather as a complex and multidimensional role encompassing both spiritual leadership and the demands of institutional compliance.

For the second research question (*How have institutional expectations of the clerical role changed in light of church regulations and control practices, and how have these influenced the various dimensions of ministerial roles?*), the research produced the following answers:

First, the transformation of the church's institutional system after the regime change has also influenced clerical roles. The legislation clearly reflects the dual nature of the clerical role: the minister must act both as a spiritual leader and as an administrative and economic manager. According to Blizzard's role typology, alongside traditional and neo-traditional roles, contemporary and diffuse functions also emerge. The administrative role is expanding and becoming more formalized. Among the modern roles are, for example, that of community organizer, project manager, or cultural coordinator—roles that can be classified as secular.

Second, while regulations prescribe certain tasks and merely recommend others, the system of expectations turns even the latter into norms. In this system, the pastoral report becomes the primary tool for evaluating the fulfillment of role-related expectations. The report not only documents parish activity but also serves to assess clerical performance. The analysis of these reports is carried out by ecclesiastical authorities at all levels, giving them institutional shaping power. Thus, clerical roles are not only formally described but are also actively monitored and shaped according to institutional norms.

In conclusion, it can be stated that church regulations and control practices—although they are legal-ecclesiastical texts and bureaucratic processes—structure the perception of the clerical role. They not only reflect institutional normative expectations but also actively shape

them, configuring the institutionalized form of the clerical role. The clerical role develops within an institutional and social field in which expectations, feedback, regulations, and practices continuously interact to define its content.

For the third research question (*What types of roles emerge in the practice of Unitarian ministers according to social, community, and institutional expectations, and how do ministers who assume these different roles interpret their vocation?*), I have formulated the following answers:

First, in recent decades, Unitarian ministry has undergone an intense and rapid change, fundamentally driven by social, cultural, and technological transformations. Based on semi-structured interviews with active ministers and statistical data, it is clear that pastoral work has become increasingly complex: secularization, generational differences, accelerated digitalization, and demographic processes profoundly influence perceptions of the clerical role. These processes point to a tendency toward partial professionalization and the formation of a hybrid role identity. The classic preaching-centered model is losing importance, while maintaining personal relationships, small-group community forms, and online presence are taking on an increasingly significant role.

Second, in the face of the decline of traditional religious activities, ministers are developing alternative responses that better fit today's often fragmented religious needs. The research distinguishes six ideal types of clerical roles: the *traditional shepherd*, the *spiritual caregiver*, the *pragmatic leader* (manager type), the *community organizer*, the *connector* as *bridge-builder*, and the *entrepreneurial type* who is open and sensitive to social contexts. These are not pure types; in practice, they often combine, influenced by factors such as parish size, the minister's gender, institutional position, or local integration. The typologies can be placed along a sacred–secular continuum.

Moreover, the diversification of clerical roles is evident: alongside spiritual leadership, administrative, communication, and public engagement tasks are becoming increasingly important. Ministers' responses often reflect a pragmatic adaptation: they seek authentic and effective ways of expression in a constantly changing social environment, while preserving the church's traditional values. Digital communication has opened a new space for pastoral work, but it also brings new challenges—such as finding a balance between online and personal relationships.

Finally, according to the answers to the third research question, religious service is often closely tied to the continuous maintenance of linguistic and ethno-cultural identity. In Unitarian

communities, where preserving the Hungarian cultural heritage is an integral part of the clerical role, this takes on multiple forms of expression.

In conclusion, the contemporary Unitarian minister is a complex actor: theologian, community leader, communicator, and cultural mediator all at once. Their work becomes truly relevant through a reflective attitude and an adaptive capacity.

For the fourth research question (*In what ways do social, community, and institutional changes shape and differentiate Unitarian clerical roles, and how do these manifest in pastoral practice?*), the research has revealed the following:

On the one hand, as a result of social and community changes, Unitarian ministry has become increasingly complex. Demographic transformations within parishes, migration, and the weakening of the institutional frameworks of religiosity have generated new challenges that must be addressed and managed in clerical activity. Ministers are faced with increasingly diverse roles. These expectations sometimes overlap or come into conflict, requiring ministers to find a balance between them in their daily work. In practice, roles are formed and reconfigured depending on the social, community, and institutional context. Clergy often feel they must simultaneously respond to multiple demands, leading them to periodically redefine their own understanding of vocation.

On the other hand, pastoral care is increasingly oriented toward individual accompaniment and personal attention, although traditional forms of family visitation remain. Flexibility and adaptation to the life situations of congregants are becoming essential. Social work is often informal and dependent on the minister, especially in rural parishes, while in urban areas more institutionalized and organized forms are emerging.

Likewise, the educational role is linked to religious instruction in schools and within the parish, with the latter being particularly affected by a lack of time and the changed lifestyles of families.

The administrative role is one of the most visibly expanded areas of activity. The maintenance and operation of institutions—often a burden that falls on ministers—together with the integration of digital management and project administration require new competencies, which pose a challenge for many ministers. The time devoted to administrative activities has increased significantly, especially in cities and larger parishes. These tasks partly exceed the scope of traditional clerical training and generate structural tensions.

Online communication represents a new and dynamic area of ministry. Most ministers already follow a conscious communication strategy, but the use of tools remains limited, with a predominance of low-tech forms (text posts, images). This activity is highly individualized and largely based on personal initiative rather than formal institutional requirements.

Furthermore, leadership is formally shared with the lay president and parish council, yet in practice ministers often bear the burden of leadership alone. Community-organizing roles form a significant part of ministers' work, functioning as latent means of maintaining community and cohesion. The vast majority of Unitarian ministers consider it important that their vocation not be limited to leading the parish but extend to the broader life of the local community. This attitude is particularly characteristic of younger ministers, while among older clergy there is more caution in this regard. The search for a balance between sacred and secular activities is more common in rural contexts, whereas urban ministers focus more on religious life. Cultural and community activities are primarily motivated by inner conviction and the opportunity for community building, while official church expectations play only a minimal motivational role. Early-career ministers carry out these activities mainly out of personal faith and vocation, whereas with age there is a greater tendency to adapt to community expectations. Ministers serving multiple small parishes tend to combine sacred and community-organizing roles more flexibly, often out of necessity due to the lack of other institutions.

Finally, the research results show that the exercise of the clerical vocation is influenced by a complex set of often competing expectations originating from three main sources: family, parish community, and church institutions. The strongest and most direct expectations come from the family, particularly for young and middle-aged ministers, often leading to role conflicts between personal life and ministry. Parish expectations are intense at the beginning and middle of a career but tend to stabilize and diminish over time as a relationship of familiarity and balance develops between minister and community. By contrast, institutional church expectations intensify with age, especially when ministers also hold leadership positions in the church. The perception of these expectations is significantly influenced by the minister's gender and place of service: female ministers tend to perceive family and parish expectations more evenly balanced, while in urban settings family pressure is stronger and parish and institutional expectations are weaker compared to rural contexts.

In conclusion, the Unitarian clerical role is strongly differentiated: alongside traditional vocational roles, there are transformed administrative tasks and new social and communication challenges that require new skills, time-management solutions, and adaptive strategies.

Overall, the complete results of the research primarily concern the organizational structure and ministers of the Unitarian Church in Romania, thus being both regionally and confessionally bounded. However, the role transformations identified—such as the growth of administrative tasks, the expansion of online communication, or the diversity of community expectations—can also highlight relevant patterns for other Protestant churches in Romania. In particular, among Protestant denominations in Central and Eastern Europe that have undergone similar social and institutional transformations, this research provides a valuable comparative basis.

Nevertheless, the study cannot be directly applied to Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, as the role of the priest in these traditions is defined theologically and organizationally in fundamentally different ways. Even so, the research methodology and theoretical framework can serve as a useful starting point for the analysis of clerical roles within traditional churches.

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