

## **State and Church Relations in Hungary**

*Hungary is a secular state operating on the principle of the separation of state and church and the neutrality of the state in the matter of religion, but this does not exclude the cooperation between the two. The legal separation of state and church does not mean separation of church and society.*

Under Communism, the church was understood as an enemy of the state that needed to be carefully viewed and controlled; during those years, churches were deprived of their properties and faced many challenges. The Parliament established the State Office for Church Affairs in 1951 in order to set up an institution officially supervising and politically directing the activity of the church and the clergy. At that time there was no question of church and state relations, as the state aimed to block and make the service of the church impossible. The church functioned in "survival" mode.

The year 1989 was a historical milestone. After the collapse of the communist regime, the relation underwent significant changes; today, the Fundamental Law of Hungary states: *"The State and religious communities shall operate separately. Religious communities shall be autonomous. The State and religious communities may cooperate to achieve community goals."*

Currently, there are 32 established churches, including the Reformed Church in Hungary (RCH). With 600 000 members, the RCH is the second largest denomination in Hungary, but still a minority church next to the Roman Catholic Church.

Churches in Hungary are looked upon as important catalysts of society, especially in terms of education, social politics, and healthcare. In Hungary, the cooperation is focused on public services (education, social services and healthcare) and some other fields, like army chaplaincy. For providing public services through church-owned institutions, the churches are entitled to the same per-capita state support as state-run institutions. Citizens have the right to choose between state and church-run institutions.

Due to history, today there are Hungarian communities living in Hungary's neighbouring countries. The Hungarian Government is taking responsibility for these communities, including institutional cooperation with the Hungarian-speaking churches. These churches beyond the border are not only taking care of the community spiritually, but also making efforts in preserving the Hungarian identity and culture.

In addition, similar to the "Otto per mille" system in Italy, taxpayers have the possibility to direct one percent of their paid income tax to a particular established church. This is the only undesignated income of the church for free use, which depends exclusively on the decision of the taxpayers: The number of how many people choose to direct their one percent of their income reflects the credibility of the church.

The RCH aims to answer the social challenges of today in credible and professional ways. In this ministry, there are examples of strategic partnership and critical engagement between church and state. In the field of Roma inclusion, the state clearly supports and has even joined in the work of the church. In regards to the refugee ministry, the church's activity is in opposition with the state's position.

The full and clear separation between church and state, which is a necessary precondition, in itself does not determine the relationship of the two parties. The relations cannot be described either in cooperation or in protest exclusively. The churches need to fulfil their mission according to their own standards, even if it meets opposition.

In this regard, RCH understands itself as a "border-crossing" community:

We cross political borders to express church unity and communion with other Hungarian-speaking Reformed churches. Similarly, we move beyond the walls of the Church in mission and social ministry, in order to transform the Church into a welcoming community in critical engagement with the government and social partners. This includes a shift from a "survival and receiver" mode to a "giving mode" of a church, which is able and willing to share its spiritual, human and even financial resources, with e.g. minority churches facing discrimination, and at times persecution in the Middle East.

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