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## The Path of the Reformed Church in Elizabeth<sup>2</sup>

### *Abstract.*

The Hungarian Reformed Church in Elizabeth, New Jersey operated for about sixty years. The congregation was established by Hungarian immigrants to the United States of America in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. On 21 May 1914, the church became member of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. The close-knit community had an active religious and social life and became an important meeting place for local Hungarians. The congregation, which had become financially independent, organized a number of charity events to finance their own expenses, missionary goals, and fundraising activities. It was also important for the congregation to cultivate its Hungarian roots. In the 1970s, it had to cease independent operation partly due to the assimilation of the second and third generations and partly because of urban planning due to the change in the social composition of the town. Rev. Bertalan Szathmáry, a pastor who had previously served in the Elizabeth congregation for several years, gathered the leaderless Newark congregants and founded a new congregation in Union.

**Keywords:** Hungarian Reformed Church, Elizabeth (New Jersey, USA), Presbyterian Church

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<sup>2</sup> The study was carried out within the framework of the *Challenges and Wayfinding in the History of the Hungarian Reformed Church in the 20th Century* research project (No. 66001R800) of the Church History Research Institute of the Faculty of Theology at Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary.



## 1. Introduction

Around the Turn of the Century, masses of people migrated from southern and eastern Europe to the United States.<sup>3</sup> Between 1861 and 1913, almost four million immigrants from different parts of the Austro–Hungarian Empire were registered by the US authorities.<sup>4</sup>

In the East Coast states of the United States of America, the Hungarian-speaking population increased significantly. In the state of New Jersey, by 1920, the Hungarian-speaking population exceeded 1,000 in four of the towns with populations between 25,000 and 100,000 inhabitants: 5,278 Hungarians lived in New Brunswick, 4,399 in Perth Amboy, 4,164 in Passaic, while Elizabeth had a Hungarian community of 1,982.<sup>5</sup>

The Hungarian population, which had grown in a relatively short time, felt the need to practice its religion according to their own denomination, and the development of church organization began in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup>

In 1904, a new church county was established under the name of Hungarian Reformed Church in America, directly under the authority of the Danubian Reformed Church District of the Reformed Church in Hungary (RCH). Despite its successes, the

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<sup>3</sup> BALOGH, Balázs (2015): Vázlat a magyarországi migrációs folyamatokról (Áttekintés a migránshullámmot megelőző száz esztendőről). In: Turai, Tünde (ed.): *Hármas határok néprajzi értelmezésben: An Ethnographic Interpretation of Tri-Border Areas*. Budapest, MTA BTK Néprajztudományi Intézet. 26; PUSKÁS, Julianna (1991): Migráció Kelet-Közép-Európában a 19. és 20. században. In: *Regio – Kisebbségtudományi Szemle*. 2, 4. 23–26.

<sup>4</sup> PUSKÁS 1991. 23–26.

<sup>5</sup> PUSKÁS, Julianna (1982): *Kivándorló magyarok az Egyesült Államokban 1880–1940*. Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó. 497.

<sup>6</sup> KOMJÁTHY Aladár (1984): *A kitántorgott egyház*. Budapest, A Református Zsinati Iroda Sajtóosztálya. 7–38. Several studies have dealt with the pace of immigration, the public response to it and its impact. See: PUSKÁS, Julianna (1982): *Kivándorló magyarok az Egyesült Államokban 1880–1940*. Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó 313–315; FRANK, Tibor (2012): *Kettős kivándorlás*. Budapest – Berlin – New York (1919–1945). Budapest, Gondolat. 145–145; VÁRDY, Béla – VÁRDY HUSZÁR, Ágnes (2005): *Újvilági küzdelmek. Az amerikai magyarság élete és az óhaza*. Budapest, Mundus Magyar Egyetemi Kiadó. 180–194.

Hungarian church was unable to gather all the Hungarian Reformed communities in the US under its jurisdiction. Mainly those congregations that were further along in the integration process distanced themselves from this church. Some of the pastors serving in the US also did not support the initiative for livelihood reasons, especially those who were not trained in Hungary and feared for their jobs under the authority of the church in Hungary. A significant number of these pastors served under the authority of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA) or other Protestant churches in the US.<sup>7</sup> This resulted in several Protestant communities operating independently, which did not favour the cohabitation of the Reformed Hungarians. Another factor was that the different denominations competed with each other, which in many cases led to church splits and the organization of so-called “counter-churches”.<sup>8</sup>

This study focuses on the congregation in Elizabeth that operated within the PCUSA, which was dominant in New Jersey in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1920, there were six congregations (Alpha, Elizabeth-Bayonne, Caldwell, Wharton, New Brunswick, Middletown) operating within the framework of this denomination in the state of New Jersey;<sup>9</sup> however, by 1941 this number had increased (Alpha, Bayonne-Jersey City, Caldwell, Elizabeth, Franklin, New Brunswick, Newark, Wharton). This also means that almost all the largest settlements in New Jersey inhabited by Hungarians had a Presbyterian congregation.

Based on the minutes and archives of the Reformed congregation in Elizabeth preserved in the archives of the American Hungarian Foundation<sup>10</sup>, this paper attempts to outline the main crossroads in the history of the community, its legal and social challenges, as well as the responses to them.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> PUSKÁS 1982, 265–268.

<sup>8</sup> Op. cit. 279.

<sup>9</sup> Op. cit. 544. The number continued to increase by 1941. Op. cit. 549.

<sup>10</sup> 300 Somerset St, New Brunswick, NJ 08901, United States.

<sup>11</sup> BALOGH, Balázs (2017): A magyar bevándorlók néprajzi kutatása amerikai archívumokban. In: Jakab, Albert Zsolt – Vajda, András (eds.) *Örökség, archívum és reprezentáció*. Kolozsvár, Kriza János Néprajzi Társaság. 29–40.

## 2. Challenges and Strategies of the Elizabeth Reformed Church

### *2.1. The Birth of the Congregation*

Several attempts were made to organize a Hungarian Reformed congregation in Elizabeth. In 1908, István Csépké, a minister in Woodbridge, held services for the local Hungarian-speaking Reformed population, but the initiative was not successful. In the spring of 1911, Rev. Lajos Nánássy of Perth Amboy began to organize the church, but as he was unable to serve two congregations at the same time, he interrupted his ministry in Elizabeth after five months. For the next two years, no church planting attempt is known.

Finally, Mihály Tóth, a student of theology in Bloomfield, organized the Reformed Hungarians in Elizabeth into a congregation. The first service took place on 28 September 1913 being attended by 32 people (24 men and 8 women). At the following meeting, the congregation was officially founded. In December, the congregation, which had grown to 65 members, petitioned the PCUSA district for admission. By February 1914, the congregation of 153 members had found support not only among the Hungarians but also among the American population.<sup>12</sup>

The church district admitted the congregation to the Presbytery of Elizabeth in a solemn service on 21 May 1914, and the church became a member of the PCUSA.

At the same time, they had to solve the problem that the newly formed congregation did not have its own building for religious and community events. Initially, services were held in the school premises of the German Presbyterian Church, and no rent was charged. When this was discovered, the German congregation dismissed both the German pastor and the Hungarian congregation, and eventually they gave the congregation a smaller building that was meant for educational purposes. The Goodwill Chapel at the corner of New Point Road and Magnolia Avenue was purchased in 1914. Soon after, Sunday school classes began, and the Women's Association was established.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> UJLAKY, János (1914): Magyar Református Egyházak Amerikában. In: *Amerikai Magyar Reformátusok Lapja*. 1914/6. 12; BOGÁR, Károly (1963): *Az Elizabethi Magyar Egyesült Református Egyház Emlék Albuma az 50 éves évforduló alkalmából*. Elizabeth, N. J. 5–7.

<sup>13</sup> UJLAKY 1914, 12.

The most important task of the first decade was to strengthen the community, which proved to be a burdensome task due to the above-mentioned denominational diversity, the restrictions on the pace of immigration imposed by the US legislature, and the financial situation of immigrants. The first real crisis arose in 1917, when Rev. Mihály Tóth resigned in October, and in the time that followed there was even rumour about selling the church building, sealing the fate of the congregation. This idea was eventually dropped a year later, in 1920, and the congregation began to grow slowly.

### ***2.2. Contributions to the Identity of the Reformed Church in Elizabeth***

According to Julianna Puskás, ethnic traditions were first and most quickly set aside by the church communities within the Presbyterian Church. The Presbyterian Church pushed assimilation more vigorously than any other church. From the outset, it was against employing Hungarian-trained ministers, and in its own seminaries, even in quick courses, it sought to train its “missionaries to a mindset in which they could be direct helpers in the faster assimilation. The level of qualification of the ‘Hungarian Reformed pastors’ working in the service was generally below that of the other groups, leading to much criticism and controversy.”<sup>14</sup>

Aladár Komjáthy considered the strong assimilationist tendencies less a specific feature of the Presbyterian Church rather than a general social and church policy approach. According to Komjáthy, by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it had become an important element of church policy that immigrants “must be evangelized” because failure to do so would lead to the ruin of America. “The Americanization = evangelization formula was then a common doctrine in all American Protestant denominations.”<sup>15</sup>

Sunday school started in Elizabeth on 19 April 1914, and a year later 68 children were attending.<sup>16</sup> In addition, a daily Hungarian school was organized for July and August. “59 children studied Hungarian reading and writing as well as the history and

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<sup>14</sup> PUSKÁS 1982, 269; KOMJÁTHY 1984, 247–250; PINTZ, Katalin (2017): Puskás Julianna hagyatéka – Hívás és identitástudat az amerikai magyar közösségek szolgálatában. In: Puskás, Julianna – Kovács, Ábrahám: *Amerikai magyar református lelkészek életútja adattári rendszerben 1891–2000*. Debrecen, Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó. 293. *Regio*. 27 (2019/3), 318.

<sup>15</sup> KOMJÁTHY 1984, 56.

<sup>16</sup> BOGÁR 1963, 9.

geography of Hungary at our school. We began the rescue work in the souls of 59 children who were about to lose their Hungarian nationality, instilling in them the love of the Hungarian race and nationality, so that instead of despising it, they would be proud of the people to which their dear parents belonged.” 50 children passed their exam on 30 August.<sup>17</sup> Over time, the number of children attending Sunday school increased to 40-50, and the total enrolment rose to 82, but “due to traditional Hungarian carelessness, only about half of this number was actually doing their schooling properly”.<sup>18</sup>

From the late 1920s on, second-generation children born in the USA loosened their ties with their Hungarian roots and identity, attending their parents’ institutions, clubs, and churches less and less. One of the disputes between the generations was the change in the language used for church services, as from the second half of the 1930s the emphasis shifted from forcing to maintain Hungarian language to a focus on knowledge of Hungarian culture. It became increasingly accepted that the mother tongue was English.<sup>19</sup>

However, the new regulations drawn up and adopted by the Church in Elizabeth in 1947, to counteract this process, stipulated that the official language of the Church was Hungarian and that English was to be reserved for use only in dealing with the various ecclesiastical and secular authorities, and it was to be used only to the extent necessary and only as a substitute.<sup>20</sup>

The idea of the service in English first arose in 1949, according to the preserved minutes. Then one of the church elders, István Erdődy, proposed to have services held on the last Sunday of every month.<sup>21</sup> Almost at the same time, the language skills of the new generation became a problem. According to the minutes, a member of the congregation

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<sup>17</sup> Op. cit. 11.

<sup>18</sup> Op. cit. 13.

<sup>19</sup> PUSKÁS, Julianna – KOVÁCS, Ábrahám (2017): A magyarországi bevándorlók sajátos társadalmi helyzete és a letelepedés kérdései. In: Puskás, Julianna – Kovács, Ábrahám: *Amerikai magyar református lelkészek életútja adattári rendszerben 1891–2000*. Debrecen, Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó. 20–21.

<sup>20</sup> Archives of the American Hungarian Foundation, III. 5. Presbyterian. Elizabeth NJ Hungarian Presbyterian Church. *The Book of Protocols of the Elizabeth NJ Hungarian Presbyterian Church between 3 April 1932 – 28 January 1951* [hereinafter referred to as: Protocol]. 208.

<sup>21</sup> Op. cit. 256, 278.

said that many Hungarians sent their children to the English church because they no longer spoke Hungarian even though they would have had the opportunity to learn it in the church in Elizabeth. Another member complained that in Hungary, where the practice of religion was restricted, people still attended church regularly, whereas in America, where the practice of religion was free, people did not want to go to church.<sup>22</sup>

With the involvement of the PCUSA, the unity of the Hungarian Reformed Church was broken, and rivalry appeared among the American mission churches.<sup>23</sup>

Members of congregations had little or no understanding of the importance of organizational affiliation. Because of their strong national attachment, it was important to them that church communities maintain the Hungarian church customs and liturgy unaltered. They sought to require it of all pastors of any denomination. To this end, several churches laid down in their rules according to which the pastors were obliged to conduct the service according to the customs in Hungary.<sup>24</sup>

The first tension in the life of the Elizabeth church occurred in the year after its establishment. It is not known exactly what happened, but the following sentence is very meaningful: “It is very unfortunate, but we must mention for posterity that during the past year the follower of the religion of hatred have succeeded in turning some of our church members away, but we trust in Christ and hope that perhaps it won’t last forever.”<sup>25</sup>

In 1952, the 1915 incident was repeated, “the old Turanian curse came upon us again”.<sup>26</sup> Some members of the congregation tried to organize a new church under the authority of the Independent Church<sup>27</sup> nearby.<sup>28</sup>

Further, the attachment to the Presbyterian Church was not a smooth road either. In the recollections of the 1920s, we can see that the Hungarian Reformed community

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<sup>22</sup> Op. cit. 295–296.

<sup>23</sup> PUSKÁS 1982, 260.

<sup>24</sup> Op. cit. 269.

<sup>25</sup> BOGÁR 1963, 13.

<sup>26</sup> Op. cit. 23.

<sup>27</sup> The Independent Hungarian Reformed Church of America was founded on 9 December 1924. The first Constituent Assembly, composed of clergy and lay representatives of the churches of Duquesne, Perth Amboy, McKeesport, Detroit, Donora, and Carteret, proclaimed the formation of the Independent Hungarian Reformed Church in America.

<sup>28</sup> BOGÁR 1963, 23.

in Elizabeth was distancing itself from the mother church, and in 1920 the question arose whether they wanted to remain under the authority of the Presbyterian Church at all. The details of the debate are not known, but the result is clear: the congregation decided to stay.<sup>29</sup>

However, the minutes drafted ten years later suggest that the earlier cultural autonomy had diminished. The Annual General Meeting of the church held on 3 April 1932 decided, “using the rules of the Presbyterian Church, the new church year will begin on the April 1<sup>st</sup> and end on the last day of March”.<sup>30</sup> A very good relationship can be inferred from the record that in 1932 the chief elder and the elder attended the “English Church Assembly” and were highly praised, saying that “the church has not been in such a good situation since it got in the hands of the Hungarians”.<sup>31</sup>

Three years later, it was Rev. Árpád György who announced at the regular monthly meeting of the Elizabeth church on 2 October 1935 that he would change the new order of services to the old way, and this was supported by the attendees.<sup>32</sup> It was still he who suggested a few years later that since the pastor of the Homeland Convention was preaching in Perth Amboy on 30 November 1941, they should reschedule their own service so that they could attend.<sup>33</sup>

### *2.3. The Church Organization from Below*

In 1947, the Elizabeth church drafted a new set of organizational rules, which is helpful in defining the internal organization and the legal layers of the church, as the previous rules are not yet known.<sup>34</sup> “Our church is an integral part of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, and is a constituent part of Elizabeth Presbytery, and is to be governed by its laws, rules and regulations.” The bylaws also detailed church membership. This is significant because such detailed local regulation

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<sup>29</sup> Op. cit. 17.

<sup>30</sup> *Protocol*, 1.

<sup>31</sup> Op. cit. 13.

<sup>32</sup> Op. cit. 59.

<sup>33</sup> Op. cit. 131.

<sup>34</sup> Title in full: Az Elizabethi, N. J. Magyar Presbyteriánus Egyház Szervezeti Szabályzata [Bylaws of the Hungarian Presbyterian Church in Elizabethi, N. J.].

also meant that the Hungarian Reformed Church in Elizabeth had a high autonomy in many respects within the Presbyterian Church. Membership of the church was open to baptized and confirmed individuals aged 16 and above who had signed a declaration of admission, accepted the rules of the church, and led a Christian, blameless, godly life. There was also a minimum donation requirement for members. This was also important because, as I will discuss in detail later, churches basically had to raise the funds for their operations themselves, with members financing renovations, investments, and programmes.

All married couples or earning single men or women had to pay at least one dollar a month, and confirmed members who were not yet employed at least 50 cents a month. Donating was also an important factor in church finances. The call for donations was organized. The bylaws provided that the donations were collected during the monthly or at least quarterly visits by the members. The church bylaws also recognized sponsorship. One could become a sponsor if they were paying at least \$12 a year into the church treasury.<sup>35</sup> Those who had not fulfilled the obligations of membership must have been sponsors.

The main decision-making body was the General Assembly, while the Session was responsible for operational tasks. The Church Council exercised the governing power of the church at the Church Council meetings and the congregation at the annual general assemblies. All ordinary members of the congregation could be full members of the congregational assembly, but each could only exercise his rights in person.

A congregational assembly had to be held at least once a year. A significant restriction of scope was that its agenda could not include anything that had not already been discussed by the Session meeting. Its decisions could be challenged at the Presbytery.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to the pastor, another important position was that of the chief elder elected by the assembly. Other offices included the notary, the treasurer, and the auditor. The chairman of the church council was the elected pastor of the congregation, who was replaced by the elder if he was unable to attend. No meetings could be held in their absence.

The members of the Church Council carried out their daily work in various committees (e.g. the Stewardship Committee, the Education Committee).<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *Protocol*, 209.

<sup>36</sup> *Op. cit.* 211.

<sup>37</sup> *Op. cit.* 212–213.

The rights and powers of church officials were governed by the relevant parts of the constitution of the general church.<sup>38</sup>

The fate of the Reformed families in Garwood was pending for a long time. In 1935, the pastor of the Elizabeth church began to reorganize the Reformed community,<sup>39</sup> where he held service every second week. Over the years, the church became more solid and grew both financially and member-wise. Therefore, at its meeting held on 29 June 1944, the Church Council decided to propose that the Garwood congregation be formally admitted as a mission congregation of the Elizabeth Church, and this was submitted to the attention of the Presbytery and the Internal Mission Council.<sup>40</sup>

#### ***2.4. Challenges and Quests in the Life of the Church***

When the book of protocols was started, the church was struggling with major problems. It had few members and was in a difficult financial situation.

The size of the congregation cannot be accurately determined, and in the absence of figures and statistics, we can only examine and draw conclusions from scattered data. The rapid growth of the church in the years of its establishment, as mentioned earlier, was often followed by a downturn, the reasons for which are not necessarily to be found within the church. In addition to individual internal or inter-denominational disputes, general social factors such as assimilation, internal migration, and the decline or ethnic change in external migration have also had a significant impact and forced the churches struggling to survive to develop new strategies.

In 1938, it was noted that there was a significant increase, but in the absence of figures, only the minutes of the renewal elections could be used to infer it.<sup>41</sup> And in 1949, a major fundraising campaign was launched, with the number of families in the congregation estimated at around 115.<sup>42</sup> Also, the bylaws adopted two years earlier, especially the numerous committees within the church council, suggest that the backbone of the congregation was made up of several very active families.

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<sup>38</sup> Op. cit. 214.

<sup>39</sup> UJLAKY 1914, 12; BOGÁR 1963, 19.

<sup>40</sup> *Protocol*, 135, 141, 152, 171.

<sup>41</sup> Op. cit. 85, 98.

<sup>42</sup> Op. cit. 276.

The key to the life of the Elizabeth congregation was the various associations and societies, which were essential in keeping the community programmes, the cultural life beyond religious life going, and the financial basis for operation.

In August 1914, the Women's Association was founded, aimed at providing financial and moral support to the Church.<sup>43</sup> The independent operation of the Women's Association could not be consolidated in the first period, and in 1915 a Men's and Women's Social Association was established instead. The first confirmation was held in 1916: 10 children applied, 7 of whom were successfully confirmed. They formed the first Bible class.<sup>44</sup> In the 1920s, several attempts were made to form and maintain different groups. The Women's Association was finally founded in 1927 and played a significant role in the life of the congregation. Membership in the association was not restricted by any denominational rules: "Membership is open to all Hungarian-speaking women, irrespective of religion or age, who agree in principle with the bylaws, and who embrace and abide by them."<sup>45</sup> It has become the church's strongest and most enthusiastic financial supporter. In addition to its strong support for the church, the cultural development of its members was an important part of the rules of the Women's Association, which included an annual trip and several social gatherings every winter.<sup>46</sup>

The various associations supported the church not only in organizational aspects but also financially. On 5 December 1943, at the regular monthly meeting of the church, gratitude was recorded in the minutes to the Women's Association and the Youth Society, which donated \$50 each.<sup>47</sup>

According to a minute, the Women's Association celebrating its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1947 had 69 members, most of whom paid monthly fees.<sup>48</sup> Their activities are well described in the following: "On this occasion, our Women's Association had our church

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<sup>43</sup> BOGÁR 1963, 11.

<sup>44</sup> Op. cit. 15.

<sup>45</sup> Memorial Album of the Hungarian United Presbyterian Church Women's Association in Elizabeth, N. J. 1920–1962. Elizabeth, N. J. 1962. 1.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> *Protocol*, 44.

<sup>48</sup> The funeral book of the Hungarian Reformed Women's Association in Elizabeth, N. J. 1–6. Archives of the American Hungarian Foundation, III. 5. Presbyterian. Elizabeth NJ Hungarian Presbyterian Church.

repainted. Our church has rebuilt the pulpit platform, covered the floor with new carpet and made new red velvet tablecloths for the pulpit and the Communion table.”<sup>49</sup> In addition, the Women’s Association introduced death allowances for its members and set them to an amount in dollars equal to the number of members.

At the same festive preparation, the activities of another society were also recorded. The Society of Newlyweds had the classroom as well as the ground-floor room painted, and on other occasions donated individual communion glasses. The Youth Society also did its share of the work, doing the exterior “sprucing up” at its own expense and repainting the iron fence around the church.<sup>50</sup> In the late 1940s, the congregation even established a choir.

The congregation had a lively social life. Even the first Christmas celebration in 1913 was memorable, as the congregation was joined by American supporters and most of the Hungarian societies in Elizabeth were represented, led by the First Hungarian Glee Club.<sup>51</sup>

Each community organized programmes for themselves and the congregation as a whole. Young people attended youth conferences,<sup>52</sup> organized plays,<sup>53</sup> could attend Sunday and summer schools, but there were also performances where the youth orchestra was able to show off its skills and was on the agenda of the summer camp.<sup>54</sup> In 1931, a member of the congregation even built a stage, which allowed for plays to be held.<sup>55</sup>

Picnics, card parties were a typical and very popular joint pastime,<sup>56</sup> as well as bingo nights in wintertime. There was also a movie night, where they could watch some of the worship services locally recorded or the services of the English Presbyterian congregations.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> BOGÁR 1963, 21.

<sup>50</sup> Op. cit. 21.

<sup>51</sup> Op. cit. 7.

<sup>52</sup> *Protocol*, 94.

<sup>53</sup> Op. cit. 42.

<sup>54</sup> Op. cit. 68.

<sup>55</sup> BOGÁR 1963, 19.

<sup>56</sup> *Protocol*, 65.

<sup>57</sup> Op. cit. 107.

Among their celebrations, we can find the American-rooted Mother's Day,<sup>58</sup> and the Women's Association also organized harvest balls, which go back to Hungarian traditions.<sup>59</sup> Commemorations were also held on Hungarian national holidays, celebrating the founding of the state on 20 August,<sup>60</sup> and they also commemorated the 1848 Revolution and War of Independence on 15 March and 6 October.<sup>61</sup> As time went by, however, the protocol also captured the preparations for the American holidays, and the celebration of Thanksgiving became more and more common in the Hungarian Reformed communities.

They also maintained active relations with neighbouring churches, participating in events at the John Calvin Church in Perth Amboy,<sup>62</sup> the Reformed days in Trenton, the Presbyterian conference in Perth Amboy<sup>63</sup> or the Hungarian Reformed Days,<sup>64</sup> and many other programmes organized by the churches around.

In addition to the programmes, there was also an emphasis on the preservation and improvement of existing properties and the purchase of new property.

On 18 August 1940, the poor state of church property was discussed. In the years that followed, the renovation of the church and the buildings was the most financially and manpower-consuming activity.<sup>65</sup>

In October 1940, representatives of the Elizabeth, Perth Amboy, and Woodbridge churches met with the Clover Leaf Memorial Park Cemetery. The idea was to create a section of the cemetery where Hungarians could be buried.<sup>66</sup> A separate letter written by the pastor to the congregants, which is part of the file, reveals that in 1954 the presbytery of the Elizabeth congregation finally agreed to create a separate section of the cemetery for the burial of the congregation members, separated by a hedge from the rest.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> *Op. cit.* 68.

<sup>59</sup> *Op. cit.* 42.

<sup>60</sup> *Op. cit.* 70.

<sup>61</sup> *Op. cit.* 116.

<sup>62</sup> *Op. cit.* 29.

<sup>63</sup> *Op. cit.* 87.

<sup>64</sup> *Op. cit.* 67.

<sup>65</sup> *Op. cit.* 115.

<sup>66</sup> *Op. cit.* 118.

<sup>67</sup> Bertalan Szathmáry's letter dated 28 April 1953. Archives of the American Hungarian Foundation, III. 5. Presbyterian. Elizabeth NJ Hungarian Presbyterian Church.

In November 1944, they purchased the long-wanted parsonage. It was a huge event in the life of the congregation when a family home was purchased as a parsonage at 23 Highland Avenue, one of the most beautiful areas in the city. Of the \$8,500 price, \$5,500 were paid immediately, of which the church treasury paid \$1,000, the women's congregation contributed the same, and \$3,500 were raised through a fundraising effort by church sponsors and congregants.<sup>68</sup>

The issue of church funding was key to the survival of the church, as the churches did not receive state support under the principle of separation of church and state.

The Elizabeth congregation also developed a number of ways to cover expenses such as the pastor's salary, the purchase and maintenance of the building, and later the purchase and maintenance of the parsonage, as well as the cost of certain programmes.

The building was often rented out to other congregations. Until 1934, a Portuguese congregation occasionally rented the church,<sup>69</sup> and in 1935 the Pentecostal church signed a contract with the congregation,<sup>70</sup> based on which the church was to be used for Sunday worships for decades.<sup>71</sup>

In 1933, the pastor introduced the envelope system to encourage church members to donate regularly.<sup>72</sup>

Árpád György initiated a new fee scheme, whereby the official fee for non-church members using the ministry for a funeral outside the church is \$15, of which \$5 would be the share of the church. For burial and memorial services in the church, the fee amounted to \$25, of which \$10 belonged to the church. The marriage service fee outside the church cost \$15, while using the church cost \$10, and a baptism cost \$7.50. Then, if they wanted to use the church but did not want collection, they had to pay \$5 to the church treasurer.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> BOGÁR 1963, 19. *Protocol*, 176–177.

<sup>69</sup> *Protocol*, 40.

<sup>70</sup> Op. cit. 48–49.

<sup>71</sup> BOGÁR 1963, 19.

<sup>72</sup> Op. cit. 19.

<sup>73</sup> This was adopted by the Church Council with minor amendments. Minutes, 68, 76. From 1945, non-church members were required to pay \$20 to the pastor and \$10 to the church for funeral services. *Protocol*, 185.

The 1947 Church Organization Regulations clarified the charges for church services. For church members, baptisms during regular services cost \$5, while baptisms during separate special occasions cost \$10. Marriage ceremonies were charged \$15.<sup>74</sup> Funeral services at the funeral home, church, and cemetery cost \$25;<sup>75</sup> for funeral services held only at the funeral home and cemetery, the fee was \$15. Non-members were charged twice the rate. Etc.<sup>76</sup>

The rules regulated not only fees but also the methods and types of donations.<sup>77</sup>

The church had to borrow money for extraordinary expenses. The congregation and the Women's Association were only able to pay \$5,500 of the \$8,500 purchase price for the parsonage, and a mission mortgage loan was contracted from the Presbyterian Church to raise the remaining \$3,000.<sup>78</sup>

This was not unprecedented; in 1937, as according to the minutes, the congregation decided to repay \$150 to the church's mission that year for a previous debt.<sup>79</sup>

In August 1948, the President of the Board of National Missions expressed his satisfaction with the progress of the congregation and offered to decrease the amount by \$300 if \$1,000 was repaid by 31 December.<sup>80</sup> In order to grasp this opportunity, the pastor proposed to issue securities in denominations of \$10, for a total of \$3,000, redeemable within five years.<sup>81</sup> Not all debts could be paid, so in 1949 a movement was started in the church to settle the financial situation. Finally, in 1950, the debt of \$3,067 was paid, and the certificate of indebtedness was bought by Dr Károly Eisler and burnt in a solemn ceremony in front of the congregation.<sup>82</sup>

We also find examples of women borrowing \$100 from the women's association for small but urgent investments.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> About \$206 at the current exchange rate.

<sup>75</sup> About \$344 at the current exchange rate.

<sup>76</sup> *Protocol*, 210–211.

<sup>77</sup> *Op. cit.* 210.

<sup>78</sup> *Op. cit.* 177.

<sup>79</sup> *Op. cit.* 82.

<sup>80</sup> *Op. cit.* 241.

<sup>81</sup> *Op. cit.* 256.

<sup>82</sup> BOGÁR 1963, 23.

<sup>83</sup> *Protocol*, 271.

In addition to drafting the new regulations, Károly Bogár developed a new method to solve the church's financing problems. He had small "house-church baskets" made and distributed to the faithful, "asking them to remember God's never-ending goodness with their daily donations". And the money collected was used for public church expenses and charitable donations.<sup>84</sup> Various charity and fundraising events continued to play an important role in church funding.

In 1960, the Church reached an important milestone. The missionary aid, which they had been receiving for years, was discontinued by the Presbyterian Church on 1 January, making the Elizabeth congregation a self-supporting church.<sup>85</sup>

### *2.5. The Pastors of the Congregation*

The American Presbyterian Church was reluctant to employ ministers schooled in Hungary, so in its own seminaries, even in quick courses, it tried to train its "missionaries to adopt an approach that would make them direct helpers in accelerating assimilation". As mentioned above "The level of qualification of the 'Hungarian Reformed pastors' working for it was generally below that of the other groups, which became a source of much criticism and controversy."<sup>86</sup> The Bloomfield Seminary was also criticized by László Ravasz, while Aladár Komjáthy, though acknowledging its weaknesses, emphasized the work of theologians of Hungarian origin in the Hungarian community and its importance.<sup>87</sup>

Undoubtedly, pastors and church members also had to operate with a business mindset. Due to the separation of church and state, churches received no state aid, so in order to avoid debts, members had to support churches financially to a significant extent, as the examples above have shown.<sup>88</sup>

It is also clear from the lives of the pastors that, in addition to their religious and church-organizing activities, they also placed a similar emphasis on the preservation of Hungarian identity and language.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> BOGÁR 1963, 21.

<sup>85</sup> Op. cit. 25.

<sup>86</sup> PUSKÁS 1982, 269.

<sup>87</sup> KOMJÁTHY 1984, 247–254.

<sup>88</sup> PINTZ 2017, 318.

<sup>89</sup> Op. cit. 318.

Below is a brief presentation of the pastors who served in the Elizabeth congregation.

Mihály Tóth was born on 14 September 1885 in Hejce, Abaúj-Tolna County. He went to the US at a very young age, in 1901, where he graduated from Bloomfield College in 1916. His ordination took place in 1916 in the church of the Elizabeth congregation that he had founded. He was barely 28 years old when the congregation was founded (1913). A year later, in 1914, he founded the Bayonne church in New Jersey. He served in these two congregations until 1918. He then moved to Alpha and then to Detroit, which, after 18 years of hard work, became the largest church in the States.<sup>90</sup>

The Elizabeth congregation also had its own student of theology, Mátyás Daróczy, who was admitted to Bloomfield Seminary in August 1914,<sup>91</sup> but his career was no longer connected to the church.

Béla Bertók served in the congregation for four years between 1917 and 1921 and died in 1946 as pastor of the Hungarian Reformed Congregation of Pocahontas.<sup>92</sup> In 1921, the problem of the lack of a parsonage arose, causing heated discussions that led to the pastor's resignation. On 1 September 1922, Sándor Dókus was called to fill the position of pastor, but less than three years later, in November 1925, the ministry was again vacant, and Rudolf Pompl took it for a year. No ordained pastor could be found, so Bertalan Szathmáry, a student at Bloomfield Seminary, served the congregation from 1926.<sup>93</sup>

Szathmáry was born on 5 June 1902 in Szikszó, Abaúj-Torna County. In 1914, at the age of 12, he moved to the United States of America. He completed his high school education in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania. He received his degree in 1927 after graduating from Bloomfield Seminary. He was ordained a minister in Newark the same year. He served as a pastor in Elizabeth (NJ 1927–1936), Leechburg (PA, 1936–1942), Astabula-Conneaut-Erie (OH–PA, 1943–194), Gary (Ind. 1945–194), and Perth Amboy (NJ, 1947–1955). In 1955, he became pastor of the Dutch Reformed Church of Long Branch, NJ, where he served until his retirement in 1967. From 1968 until his death on 6 July 1972, he led the United Hungarian Presbyterian Church of Newark and Elizabeth. In addition to his pastoral ministry, he served on the board of the Hungarian

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<sup>90</sup> PUSKÁS – KOVÁCS 2017, 259–260.

<sup>91</sup> BOGÁR 1963, 13.

<sup>92</sup> *Bethlen Naptár*. 1947, 164.

<sup>93</sup> BOGÁR 1963, 17.

Reformed Association of America for 8 years. He represented the Dutch-American Reformed Church at the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Hungarian Church.<sup>94</sup>

Árpád György “was born in the village of Szalonna in Borsod County, in the part of the country from which most Reformed Hungarians emigrated to America”. He began his schooling in Trenton, NJ, but he continued in Szalonna because his family moved home. He completed public school in Tokaj, and then studied at the teacher-training institute of the college in Sárospatak as a cantor and teacher.<sup>95</sup> After moving back to the US with his two brothers, he studied in Bloomington. In 1935, he graduated with honours in theology. He was ordained a pastor in the Presbytery of Newark, NJ, and served in the Elizabeth Church in September of the same year.

In 1935, his ministry in the Elizabeth Church was one of the best eras of the congregation. His church-building work was decisive. He regulated salaries, set fees for services and made infrastructural improvements. Árpád György also organized the Garwood congregation. This work was discontinued, however, when he was invited to the church in the Bronx in 1942. The respect shown by the Elizabethan congregation towards him is illustrated by the fact that many of his former congregants attended the former pastor’s investiture in the Bronx on 19 April 1942.<sup>96</sup> Dezső Parragh spent barely two years at the head of the congregation, and after his departure in 1944, Árpád György was re-called. The growth continued, and the purchase of the parsonage was also attributed to him. Árpád György did not stay long the second time around, and in 1946 he was invited to the church in Chicago,<sup>97</sup> where he was a minister for 22 years. He also served as secretary, then Vice-President and President of the Western Classis of the Hungarian Reformed Church in America. He also held every office at the church district level. In 1963, he became President of the Church District. In addition to his congregational and church organizational work, he was also active in the Hungarian Reformed Federation of America. In 1968, he resigned his pastorate and served first as secretary of the Federation and then as president from 1976 to 1980. He died in 1987.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> V. F. (1972): Rev. Szathmáry Bertalan 1902–1972. In: *Calvin Synod Herald*. 72, 8–9. 13.

<sup>95</sup> BERTALAN, Imre (1989): Búcsú Ft. György Árpádtól. In: *Bethlen Naptár*. 307–308.

<sup>96</sup> *Protocol*, 139.

<sup>97</sup> BOGÁR 1963, 19.

<sup>98</sup> BERTALAN 1989, 307–308.

Dezső Parragh completed both his secondary school and his theological studies in Budapest, and passed his pastoral examination in 1935. The young talented pastor was offered scholarships for further studies first by the University of Strasbourg and then by the Seminary of Princeton. He received his master's degree from the Columbia University Department of Theology and his doctorate from the University of Chicago Theology Department. He intended to return to Hungary after his studies, but his plans were thwarted by WWII. He served in the Elizabeth church between 1942 and 1944, moving then to Bethlehem (PA). In 1947, he took over the vacancy at West Side Hungarian Reformed Church in Chicago, where he served for 50 years until 1997. From 1979 to 1982, he was elected Bishop of the United Church of Christ, Calvin Synod.<sup>99</sup>

Pastor Károly Bogár was born on 22 September 1898 in Újfehértó, Szabolcs County. His father was noble Sámuel Bogár, a Reformed pastor. He completed his secondary school education in Nagykálló and Budapest. He was conscripted into the army from the 8<sup>th</sup> grade of high school. He went to America in 1922. Here he continued his studies; he attended college in Lancaster, completed two years of theological studies at Bloomfield and a third year at Princeton. After completing his theological studies, he served as an assistant pastor in South Norwalk, then as a pastor in Pocahontas, then in McKeesport, and was elected pastor of the Hungarian Presbyterian Church in Elizabeth, where he served from 1946 to 1969. Bogár completed the reorganization of the church, drafting new bylaws unanimously approved by the General Assembly. In 1972, he was elected pastor in the Independent Hungarian Reformed Church of Staten Island when the pastorate became vacant. He died on 20 July 1973, buried in Clover Leaf Cemetery in Woodbridge.<sup>100</sup>

Dezső Takácsy was born in Windber (PA) at the parsonage. His father moved to Hungary because of homesickness and took his family with him, becoming a pastor in Zádor, in the Transdanubian region. Here he finished the elementary school, and then went to Csurgó Reformed College, where he graduated from high school and was admitted to the Pápa Reformed Theological Academy in September 1929. After taking his pastoral exams, he served as an assistant pastor in Varasd, Somogyhatvan, and then

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<sup>99</sup> *Calvin Synod Herald*. 107(2006), 5–6. 19.

<sup>100</sup> VITÉZ, Ferenc (1973): Bogár Károly (1898–1973). In: *Calvin Synod Herald*. 73, 10. 12.

as a pastor in Barcs. After his return to the US, he was supported by Bishop-superintendent Lajos Nagy. He was appointed pastor in Passaic. After the death of Bertalan Szathmáry, the Hungarian Bethlen Church in Union, made up from the former members of the Elizabeth congregation, invited him to become pastor. He served his congregation for four years, flew to Hungary on 15 June 1976 for a visit, but died before returning.<sup>101</sup>

### **3. The 1960s and the 1970s – The Last Stage of the Independent Congregation**

In 1949, the Methodist Episcopal Zion Church of Newark, NJ, sent a delegation to the Elizabeth congregation because they wanted to rent the church for Sunday afternoon services. In addition to their desire to rent, they indicated that they would be willing to purchase the property.<sup>102</sup> The Elizabeth church decided that a possible sale could be discussed against cash payment, but only if a church suitable for the congregation was found. The Elizabeth congregation began looking for a new church, but the move was eventually shelved for more than a decade.<sup>103</sup>

From the late 1950s, and especially from the 1960s, a third wave of immigration to New Jersey began, but this time it was not from European but rather mainly from Latin American countries. For example, the population of Puerto Rican descent increased from 10,000 to 240,000 between 1950 and 1980, and African Americans moving from the South to the North added about 800,000 to New Jersey's population by the early 1990s.<sup>104</sup> At the same time, the Hungarian population was steadily declining due to both migration and assimilation. From 1960, the local government of Elizabeth designated the area around the Elizabeth Church for the construction of a new housing estate of town houses as part of a comprehensive urban development plan. "At the moment, we do not know when this plan will be implemented, but we must consider

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<sup>101</sup> *Bethlen Naptár*. 1978, 76.

<sup>102</sup> *Protocol*, 281.

<sup>103</sup> *Op. cit.* 283.

<sup>104</sup> V. SHAW, Douglas (1994): *Immigration and Ethnicity in New Jersey History*. Trenton, New Jersey Historical Commission, Department of State. 58–59.

moving our church to a more suitable location in the city if the plan is approved.”<sup>105</sup> Finally, the church and the parsonage were sold in 1968. Bertalan Szathmáry, by then retired and serving in one of the best times of the congregation, gathered the remnants of a discouraged and leaderless congregation and his Newark parishioners and friends to organize a congregation in Union, NJ, and worked for the survival of that community until his death.<sup>106</sup> The congregation could rent the church of the Second Presbyterian Church for its services.<sup>107</sup>

In 1975, the congregation had about 95 members, and the pastoral ministry was carried out by Rev. Dezső E. Takácsy, who succeeded Szathmáry, until his death in 1976.<sup>108</sup>

Árpád György mentioned the Bethlen Hungarian Presbyterian Church in his article *Krízisek és válságok éve* [The Year of Crises and Depression] published in 1974, when it sponsored the construction of the new retirement home of the Bethlen Homes (Ligonier, PA) with a significant amount of money.<sup>109</sup> The annual record reads, “The Bethlen Hungarian Presbyterian Church in Union has few members, but in spirit it is one of the largest congregations. There’s worship every Sunday. Despite the dispersion and great distances, the faithful strive to come to church and meet as members of one big family in love and peace before the heavenly Father. During the Lord’s Supper and on great celebrations, the chants rise to heaven in the church filled to overflowing.”<sup>110</sup>

The 1978 report starts as follows: “The Bethlen Hungarian Presbyterian Church, established by the merger of the Presbyterian churches of Elizabeth and Newark, seeks to carry on the Hungarian Calvinistic tradition.”<sup>111</sup>

The strength and commitment of the congregation is demonstrated by the fact that it supported the studies of six theologians in the 1980s.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> BOGÁR 1963, 27.

<sup>106</sup> NAGY, Lajos (1973): Szathmáry Bertalan 1902–1972. In: *Bethlen Naptár*. 1973. 107.

<sup>107</sup> V. F. 1972, 13.

<sup>108</sup> *Bethlen Naptár*. 1976, 276.

<sup>109</sup> GYÖRGY, Árpád (1975): 1974 a krízisek és válságok éve. In: *Bethlen Naptár*. 1975, 50.

<sup>110</sup> Union, N. J. *Bethlen Naptár*. 1975, 272–273.

<sup>111</sup> Union, N. J. *Bethlen Naptár*. 1978, 196.

<sup>112</sup> Union, N. J. *Bethlen Naptár*. 1988, 212.

I last found mention of them in the Bethlen Almanac published in 2000, when Béla Kendi, the chief elder, passed on his title to his successor. The Almanac also mentions that Béla Kendi worked in the congregation for 40 years, and occasionally, in the absence of a minister, he delivered the sermon himself.<sup>113</sup>

#### 4. Conclusions

The Hungarian Reformed Church of Elizabeth was in operation for about sixty years. The Hungarian immigrants to the US in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries established a congregation within the Presbyterian Church, which was forced to cease independent operation in the 1970s due to the assimilation of the second and third generations and the urban planning of the settlement due to the changes in its social composition. The leaderless congregation founded a new community in Union together with the congregants from Newark.

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<sup>113</sup> BATIZ, Ambrus (2000): Linden, New Jersey. In: *Bethlen Almanac.* 2000. 96.; For the recent missionary endeavours among the Hungarian-American Reformed see: LÁNYI, Gábor (2017): Nyugati-parti amerikai-magyar református gyülekezetek élete és új távlatai. In: *Pro Minoritate.* 1. 171–179.

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