

# The intersecting circles of love between partner churches of Nagyenyed and Louisville.

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Visitors to Transylvania talk about the warm hospitality of the hosts. Might that be because the Unitarian Church in Transylvania is strongly committed to the Biblical commandment by Jesus to love our neighbors? But why did Unitarianism emerge in Transylvania? How did Unitarians survive centuries of severe persecution? What made them an advocate of freedom of faith and conscience? The answers bring into light the most famous son of Nagyenyed, the third bishop of the Unitarian Church.

## I.

Good morning everybody. I want to begin with saying that I'm grateful to God who in His wisdom brought us together in the First Unitarian Church of Louisville. I want to thank Claudia and David Runge for hosting me last night. I'm honored to speak to a congregation that has grown many circles of love in this community. Your congregation has the ability to reach out with kindness, patience, perseverance to work for environmental justice, immigration justice, and in the Black Lives Matter movement, among others. Other UU churches, just like your church in the past, are growing circles of love to reach all the way to partner churches there: **SLIDE 1.**

When I hear the experiences from visitors to Transylvania I'm seeing the evidence of circles of love grown by members of your partner congregation in Nagyenyed. Are you curious as why do they grow circles of love? For Transylvanian Unitarians a Biblical quote explains that. In the Book of Mark 12:29-31 where Jesus describes the two greatest commandments:

“The <sup>[a]</sup>first of all the commandments *is*: ‘Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. <sup>30</sup> And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ <sup>[b]</sup>This *is* the first commandment. <sup>31</sup> And the second, like *it*, *is* this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

From David Ferenc, the first Bishop of the Transylvanian Unitarian Church, through a long line of bishops, including the current one, Kovacs Istvan, restated the commitment of their church to that dual commandment.

It is not surprising that a special relationship may develop when a circle of love from one side of the Atlantic Ocean meets, intersects, joins another circle of love grown from the opposite side of the Atlantic.

## II.

When you picture a circle of love growing from the USA to the direction of Transylvania, it is natural to ask, just why did Unitarianism appear in Transylvania of all places? Three factors contributed to that.

**SLIDE 2.** When you look at the map of Transylvania from the 1500s, you see the first factor. The Turkish Empire conquered large part of the Hungarian Kingdom, and cut off Transylvania from the Western part of the Kingdom. Catholic religious influences became weak in the Transylvanian area, and that allowed a flow of religious ideas such as Lutheranism, Calvinism, and even ideas that questioned the tradition of Trinity.

The second factor was the relocation of Giorgio Biandrata to the court of the new Transylvanian King, John Sigismund, II. Giorgio Biandrata was well versed in the antitrinitarian writings of Michael Servet, and those antitrinitarian thoughts could now openly influence religious thinkers in Transylvania.

**SLIDE 3.** However, similar factors were present in Poland, but there, a form of Unitarianism lasted only hundred years.

The third factor was very important for the long-term stability. In Transylvania, the third factor was the court priest, David Ferenc, who was considered a theological genius of that age. After hearing about antitrinitarianism from Biandrata, David Ferenc began scrutinizing established Catholic and Protestant theology, and by 1568 he developed a theological system that is antitrinitarian, as they called it Arian, in modern

words, Unitarian. He was very effective in convincing the King and also the assembly of nobles. In 1568 the Diet of Torda accepted Arianism as the fourth recognized religion in Transylvania. All the way until his martyr death he remained the leader of the group of those Transylvanian Unitarians.

The 1568 Edict of Torda includes the statement about the freedom of faith: “in every place the preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation like it, well, if not, no one shall compel them for their souls would not be satisfied, but they shall be permitted to keep a preacher whose teaching they approve.”

**SLIDE 4.** This is the inside of the church where it happened.

### III.

While David Ferenc in 1568 achieved the acceptance of the Arians as the fourth official Christian religion in Transylvania, after the death King John Sigismund, II in 1571 the Catholic and Calvinist Transylvanian rulers eroded the effectiveness of the Edict. Initially, the oppression was mild, such as taking away printing privileges from the Unitarians, and prohibiting the development of any new religious point of view. That was followed with intimidations by executions, forced conversions, confiscation of Unitarian churches, property, schools, church buildings, printing press, and with denying royal offices to unitarians.

The Transylvanian Unitarian Church and the Unitarian believers survived hundreds of years of severe persecution, because they accepted theological compromises, made efforts to retain as many rural churches as possible, and avoided direct confrontations with Catholic authorities. It is worthwhile noting that in the midst of European wars of Counterreformation, there have been no sectarian wars started by Unitarians in Transylvania. They practiced what they preached: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

#### IV.

Most of the 455 year history of the Transylvanian Unitarian Church was in sharp contrast with the Edict of Torda written in 1568. That Edict not only guaranteed of freedom of faith. The Edict also expressed the freedom of conscience when it said: Therefore none of the superintendents or others shall abuse the preachers, no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone, and it is not permitted that anyone should threaten anyone else by imprisonment or by removal from his post for his teaching, for faith is the gift of God, this comes from hearing, which hearing is by the word of God.”

The last few words in the Edict is based on the word of God. Namely Ephesians 2:8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God,; and Romans 10:17 faith comes from hearing, which hearing is by the word of God. Therefore, as long as you have a Christian, Bible based Unitarian Church, the concepts of the freedom of faith and conscience have unshakable foundations.

During the hundreds of years of persecution, those ideals continued to live on in the hearts and minds of the unitarian people, almost as a “promised land” they once saw. Let’s listen to the words of Ferenc Jozsef from the 1868 sermon celebrating the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Transylvanian Unitarian Church (when the persecution stopped, and Unitarians were allowed to publicly celebrate anniversaries): “The freedom of faith and conscience, my dear brethren, is one of the moral concepts of great importance that first gained expression in the Christian religion through the teachings of our Lord Jesus. He respected the inner world of others - the personal thoughts, the religious feelings, and the free will of the individual to choose a particular avenue of faith. He didn’t use force or coercion, rather, his peaceful tools were persuasion and demonstration when he wished to give more emphasis to his words.” “My Christian brethren, let us raise our clasped hands to the sky; let us give thanks to the Lord in whose name we gathered for the synod; let us give thanks to Him who granted us life to live to celebrate this three hundredth anniversary of the establishment of our holy religion in our homeland; let us shout joyfully: Blessed be the indivisible single God.”

At the time of that 1868 sermon Ferenc Jozsef didn't know that the freedom of faith and conscience will yet again be restricted in 1918 when the territory of Transylvania was removed from the Kingdom of Hungary, and attached to the Kingdom of Romania. And yet again, in 1947 when Romania came under the rule of the communist party and became the Peoples Republic of Romania. The Unitarians of Transylvania lived through many decades of persecution before a semblance of democracy returned to Romania in 1989.

## V.

The role of Nagyenyed in all this happened in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The town of Nagyenyed was called Strassbourg am Mieresch, the Crossroads of the Mures River. Being at the trade crossroads Nagyenyed became a wealthy town, with resources to support schools and religious institutions. It was in the environment where the most famous Unitarian son of Nagyenyed, Enyedi Gyorgy, was born in 1555, and begin his education there. He continued his studies in Kolozsvar, and in German universities. He became a teacher at the Unitarian School in Kolozsvar, and in 1592, Enyedi Gyorgy was elected as the third bishop of the Transylvanian Unitarian church.

By that time the freedom of faith and conscience was under attack by the Catholic priests and Princes. In addition, there was a division inside the Unitarian Church. Enyedi Gyorgy made enormous efforts to unify Unitarians through teaching, and to respond to theological challenges by Catholics. His birthday and date of death is commemorated in Nagyenyed. **SLIDE 5.**

He left us over 220 sermons that he preached from the Main Square church in Kolozsvar. **SLIDE 6.**

He wrote an 800 page book in order to shed light of the Trinitarian misinterpretations of the Bible: Explanations of old and new testament passages from which the dogma of trinity is usually established. **SLIDE 7.**

Enyedi Gyorgy also wrote a booklet titled 'Brief Answers' that educates unitarian believers how to respond challenging questions from Catholics.

Because of his efforts to educate the average person about Unitarianism, Enyedi Gyorgy is being called the Unitarian Plato. Members of this congregation in the past connected with the torchbearers of such historic past. Could this congregation grow a circle of love toward Nagyenyed? All I can say is that their circle of love is still there. Amen.

**BENEDICTION:** Comes from Apostle Paul's 1<sup>st</sup> letter to the Corinthians 13:4-7 <sup>4</sup> Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. <sup>5</sup> It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. <sup>6</sup> Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup> It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

May such love find a home in our hearts and may such love remain the spirit of this church.

Go in peace.