

“Language course” in Hungary – September 2013



Having established a good and developing friendship with Methodist women from Hungary when they attended the European seminar in Glasgow in 2009 (in particular the unit president, Grethe Jenei) it was a great pleasure and privilege for Kathleen Pearson, Ann Baarda and me to be invited to travel there to lead their women’s seminar this year. Hungary is a very small Methodist church (only 425 members, with about another 1500 adherents) which, like the country as a whole, is now emerging from a Communist era which only ended in 1990. The three of us travelled at our own expense, but were warmly welcomed and generously cared for by the women during our stay.

Our week began and ended at the Methodist Church Centre in Budapest, a beautiful new building with a large sanctuary, several smaller meeting rooms and three guest bedrooms, one of which we shared for the first night after landing in Budapest, and for three nights at the end of our stay, enabling us to explore something of this beautiful city which straddles the Danube; now very much marked by re-building and a renewal of former glories. The staff at the centre could not have been kinder and provided us with wonderful continental breakfasts each morning; delicious freshly baked bread rolls, salami, cheese, tomatoes, pepper, yogurt and jams...



The seminar was held further south in the ancient city of Pécs, also very beautiful and the home of the famous Zsolnay ceramics industry, whose colourful tiles patterned so many of the roofs there and in Budapest. We travelled to Pécs by train, along with two other women attending the seminar, both of whom spoke very good English – to our relief. We had hoped to pick up a smattering of Hungarian whilst there, but found it a very challenging language, and didn’t get much beyond “köszönöm” (thank you). In Pécs we were taken to the Lutheran church, where the sessions were to be held and where simple snacks of sandwiches, cakes and hot drinks seemed to be on constant offer, despite only the smallest of kitchens. We began speaking with the women – using a smattering of German with older women, English with younger women and sign language with those in between! Introductions were made – to us, to each other and to the theme which was “nyelvtanfolyam”, a Hungarian word meaning “language course/stream”. This had been chosen by Grethe and was very appropriate; over four days, which at times felt like a intensive language summer school, we all discovered together (1) how we use language (in its widest sense) to encourage and affirm one another and in our relationship with God; (2) how learning is a necessary part of our communication and our whole lives and (3) how we can then become those streams of communication to one another and a wider world.

I shared some of what I have learned from Leah, Esther and Rebekah in daily bible studies; Kathleen led a much-appreciated session on “God’s woman” and, in various other sessions, all three of us shared stories and testimonies from our own lives. It was so moving and humbling to be taken to the hearts of these women – as I talked about Peter’s death, the woman translating for me broke down into tears, and so did many of those present, truly sharing our burdens in a very loving and special way.



Ann had brought coloured paper with her to make prayer flowers at the end of one session and as the women dropped them into trays of water and watched the petals open, there was such joy, openness and beauty on many faces – some of whom have known extremely hard times in their faith and community life over recent decades. In another moving session, different women told us (and each other) about the work they and their congregations are involved with; working with Roma communities, with mentally and physically disabled people, distributing left-over bread from a bakery to the hungry, befriending young men with depression, providing care for homeless people. In turn we shared some stories of engagement with the MDGs by Methodist women in Britain. They were particularly fascinated to hear about Street Pastors here in the UK.



Having been closely involved in the planning of the MWiB Swanwick annual residential conference for the past few years, it was intriguing to see things done in a very different context, and I wondered what people from the UK would have written on their evaluation forms about some aspects of the event! The Lutheran church, where our sessions were, had no residential or catering facilities, so for main meals we walked to a nearby restaurant, which had offered a very good deal. The 3 meals we had there all consisted of a big bowl of soup, followed by a schnitzel of one sort or another – once with rice, once with creamed potato and once with potato croquettes. All very tasty. On Thursday night we were accommodated in the local youth hostel. Situated above a bar, we had to climb two flights of stairs amidst colourful, if somewhat lurid, graffiti, to our bedrooms – three interconnected rooms with about 10 beds in each; 3 toilets and showers between about 30 women. There were no complaints and we all just got on with the business of getting as good a night's sleep as we could! The remaining two nights were spent in a Cistercian boarding school (once the students had gone home for the weekend); again dormitory accommodation, although this time Kathleen, Ann and I had one room to the three of us (with 6 desks and chairs at which to do our homework!) We thought we had an entire washroom to ourselves as well, but that's another story, connected with our inability to understand the word "gents" in Hungarian... At the end of our final visit to each of the places where we slept or ate, Grethe spoke to the staff, explained that, as a church group, we had little money to thank them, beyond paying the bill, but that we could bless them if they would like us to. Each place responded positively and so the women stood and sang a beautiful Hungarian blessing, as a round... amidst a crowded restaurant, in the downstairs bar of the youth hostel where we breakfasted, and to the hard-working cook at the school. Very moving.



In total around 40 women attended the seminar, some only coming on the Saturday when they were not at work. These ranged from students in their mid-twenties to a woman of 82 who travelled 250 miles on the train by herself but on the wrong day, arriving 24 hours too early! Needless to say, the hospitable Lutheran pastor didn't leave her on the streets of Pécs for the night! Several of the younger women had never experienced a women's gathering before and came with uncertainties... but all enjoyed it hugely and discovered how much there is to learn and experience when women of all ages come together. The final worship on Sunday morning (in heavy, cold rain!) took place some miles away in Pécs Methodist Church where a small congregation welcomed the whole group enthusiastically and Kathleen, Ann and I were each given a



Zsolnay vase – featuring a butterfly! These had been chosen before our arrival and before we had shared with them the bookmarks and pens from MWiB (which they greatly appreciated) and shared the story of our journey and new butterfly logo!



Please do pray for the women of Hungary; for Grethe who has led them so well and sacrificially for 8 years and who continues to give of herself wholeheartedly, that Hungarian Methodist women may know Christ and make him known. Pray that others may have the confidence to offer leadership. Lilla, a lay pastor with a Roma congregation, was our guide in Budapest after the end of the seminar and it was good to spend time talking with her. She has now offered to be involved in leadership of the women's movement and hopes to be in Pomezia next June, when our European family again gets together. Pray too for Agi who some may remember from Glasgow. In June this year Agi broke her neck in a car accident, but was able to be with us, and is a walking miracle. In so many ways God's guidance and grace were seen and felt during the time we shared. All in all it was a week when, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Babel could become Pentecost and each one of us was strangely warmed.



Jill Baker