

Article

The Development of the Reformed Church in Hungary

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Abstract

The Reformed Church in Hungary is a Reformed Protestant church in terms of its confession of faith, in which both adjectives, Reformed and Protestant, are emphasized. From this formulation follows the critique and firm rejection of a form of organization that existed before and still exists today: that of the Catholic Church. The foundations of Reformed (in this article, the term “Reformed” is used to designate the ecclesiastical and theological tradition associated with Calvin, Bullinger, Zwingli, and others) church institutions and church organization were formulated by Calvin in the Institutio, from which Reformed church law, through its historical development, formulated the principle of universal priesthood as a fundamental principle, the principle of synodal presbyterate as a constitutional principle of the church, and the principle of a free church in a free state, although the latter establishes the relationship between church and state. In distinguishing between a theologically postulated church and a church embodied in legal organization, canon law may examine the latter, and in particular, the canon law of the Protestant churches indeed sharply distinguishes it from the theological concept of church. Thus, in examining the development of the organization of the so-called visible church and the questions of the structure and functioning of the institution in the present, I will examine the organization and functioning of the Reformed Church in Hungary in the light of the organizational principles and methods that have developed historically, with a view to outlining the conditions for future optimal functioning. In my study, I trace the transformation of the Reformed Church from its beginnings to the change of regime.

Keywords: Reformed Church in Hungary; ecclesiastical law; presbyterian-synodal governance; church–state relations; religious freedom; church history; constitutional reform



Academic Editor: Jovan Jonovski

Received: 27 June 2025

Revised: 30 July 2025

Accepted: 15 August 2025

Published: 20 August 2025

Citation: Fekete, Sándor. 2025. The Development of the Reformed Church in Hungary. *Religions* 16: 1078. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16081078>

Correction Statement: This article has been republished with a minor change. The change does not affect the scientific content of the article and further details are available within the backmatter of the website version of this article.

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1. Introduction

The history of the Reformed Church’s institutional development in Hungary is not merely a matter of ecclesiastical interest but a mirror of the country’s broader political, social, and cultural transformations. From the early days of the Reformation through the mid-twentieth century, church structures evolved in response to shifting historical conditions and societal needs. This study traces the major stages in the organization of the Hungarian Reformed Church, with particular attention to the emergence and institutionalization of the presbyterian-synodal model within the Hungarian context. It explores not only the ecclesiastical frameworks but also the external and internal forces that shaped them—ranging from noble patronage and foreign theological influences to legal limitations and state intervention. By examining the divergent regional paths, the gradual inclusion of lay leadership, and the eventual formation of a unified national structure, this work

sheds light on how a Reformed ecclesiology rooted in Reformed thought adapted to the unique challenges of Hungarian society. Ultimately, it reveals how the Hungarian Reformed Church pursued autonomy and internal order while remaining faithful to its theological identity amid centuries of political and religious upheaval.

1.1. Research Question and Objective

The institutional evolution of the Reformed Church in Hungary cannot be properly understood without reference to the broader historical, political, and theological forces that shaped its development. While the Calvinist tradition provides a doctrinal and ecclesiological foundation for church governance, the actual structure of the Hungarian Reformed Church reflects centuries of adaptation to specific local conditions—among them the feudal order, the Habsburg absolutist regime, the Enlightenment, the emergence of liberal nationalism, and finally the ideological constraints imposed by socialist dictatorship in the twentieth century.

The central aim of this study is to analyze the development of the Reformed Church's organizational structure in Hungary from the sixteenth century to the post-World War II period, with particular emphasis on the tension between confessional identity and political subordination. Rather than offering a merely chronological narrative of institutional change, the research seeks to uncover the deeper logic behind these transformations: Why did certain ecclesiastical models emerge and persist? What mechanisms allowed for continuity in times of disruption? How did theological ideals—especially the Calvinist principles of the universal priesthood and presbyterian-synodal governance—interact with the realities of political power?

The overarching research question is as follows: How did the Hungarian Reformed Church maintain institutional continuity and adapt its governance structures in response to external political pressures, while attempting to preserve its confessional identity and theological autonomy?

This overarching question gives rise to several sub-questions, including the following:

- To what extent did the early Reformed Church in Hungary manage to implement Calvinist principles in its ecclesiastical structures, and where were compromises made?
- How did the Church respond to changing legal and political frameworks, such as the Peace of Vienna (1606), Act XXVI of 1790, the Imperial Patent of 1859, and the 1881–1882 constitutional synod?
- What role did lay participation and noble patronage play in shaping church governance, especially during periods of state interference?
- How did the rise of socialist ideology and the post-1945 regime affect the organizational autonomy of the Church, and how were these effects justified theologically by church leaders?

By answering these questions, the study seeks to contribute to the broader field of church history and ecclesiastical law, particularly in contexts where confessional traditions must operate within politically constrained environments. It also aims to provide insights into the ways religious institutions preserve core identity elements while navigating compromise, resistance, or co-optation in authoritarian settings.

1.2. Hypotheses

In order to systematically approach the institutional history of the Hungarian Reformed Church, this study formulates several working hypotheses that offer a theoretical framework for both the historical analysis and the interpretation of ecclesiastical developments. These hypotheses serve not only as guiding propositions to be examined against

historical evidence but also as conceptual tools for understanding the interplay between theology, institutional design, and political context.

Primary Hypothesis:

The development of the Hungarian Reformed Church's institutional structure was fundamentally shaped by a dual commitment: on the one hand, to maintain fidelity to Calvinist theological principles—most notably the presbyterian-synodal model and the doctrine of the universal priesthood—and on the other hand, to ensure practical survival and legal recognition within often hostile or authoritarian political environments. As a result, the Church adopted a form of adaptive institutional conservatism that enabled it to retain core structural elements while making concessions in governance when external pressures demanded it.

Secondary Hypotheses:

The institutional form of the Reformed Church in Hungary was never a mere transplantation of Genevan or Western European Calvinist models, but rather a hybrid system deeply influenced by Hungary's unique socio-political conditions, including noble patronage, confessional pluralism, and the centralizing tendencies of successive regimes (Habsburg absolutism, Austro-Hungarian dualism, and socialism).

Lay participation in church governance—particularly through the institution of the presbytery and the office of curator—was both a theological expression of the Reformation's emphasis on communal authority and a pragmatic necessity in a society where ecclesiastical and noble elites were deeply intertwined. However, this participation remained uneven, often contested, and was periodically curtailed by clericalist or state-centric forces.

Periods of heightened political control (e.g., during the Counter-Reformation, under the 1859 Imperial Patent, or during the socialist era after 1948) led to systematic attempts to restructure the Church in a more hierarchical, centralized, and state-compliant form, often in direct contradiction to the Church's theological identity. These interventions triggered internal debates over the limits of accommodation and the meaning of ecclesial autonomy.

Efforts at ecclesiastical renewal and reform—such as those initiated after World War II by the Free Council or articulated in the theological writings of Imre Révész—demonstrated an enduring internal aspiration within the Reformed Church to reclaim its original principles, even when such aspirations remained unfulfilled due to political suppression.

The tension between theological ideals and political necessity produced a distinctive Reformed institutional culture in Hungary, one characterized by an ongoing dialectic between resistance and adaptation. This culture explains the relative resilience of the presbyterian-synodal structure even in contexts where episcopal or authoritarian leadership was externally imposed.

These hypotheses will be tested and refined through the detailed examination of church laws, synod decisions, state legislation, and theological discourses across several historical periods. Their purpose is to allow for a nuanced understanding of the Reformed Church not simply as a passive object of state policy but as an active agent negotiating its identity in a politically dynamic and ideologically contested environment.

1.3. Methodology

This study employs a multidisciplinary historical-analytical methodology grounded in both church history and the study of ecclesiastical law. Given the complexity of the institutional evolution of the Reformed Church in Hungary—situated at the intersection of theology, law, and political history—an integrated methodological approach is required to properly assess the various forces shaping its development across five centuries.

1.3.1. Historical-Analytical Approach

The core method of the research is qualitative historical analysis. The study traces the chronological development of the Church's governance structures from the sixteenth-century Reformation to the mid-twentieth century socialist period. Particular attention is paid to the following:

- The formulation and implementation of ecclesiastical ordinances (e.g., *Articuli majores*, *Komját* and *Szatmárnémeti* canons);
- The outcomes and debates of national and regional synods (e.g., 1881–1882 Debrecen Synod, and Budapest synods of 1891, 1904, and 1928);
- Critical turning points in church–state relations (e.g., the Peace of Vienna in 1606, Act XXVI of 1790, the Protestant Patent of 1859, and the 1948 concordat).

This approach is supplemented by contextualization within broader socio-political and ideological frameworks—such as the confessional politics of the early modern period, Habsburg centralization, and Marxist-Leninist church policy.

1.3.2. Source Base

The research draws on a diverse range of sources, including the following:

Primary sources:

- Synodal decrees and canonical texts;
- Church constitutions and legal codes (e.g., the 1881 constitution);
- State legislation and royal decrees affecting church governance;
- Writings of key theologians and church leaders (e.g., Péter Méliusz, Imre Révész, and Albert Bereczky);
- Memoirs, speeches, and theological theses presented at reform councils or conventions (e.g., the Free Council of 1946).

Secondary sources:

- Academic monographs and journal articles in the fields of church history, Hungarian political history, and theology;
- Historiographical works analyzing the Reformed Church's institutional role within Hungarian society;
- Legal commentaries on ecclesiastical legislation.

Whenever possible, original documents and editions are consulted. Archival sources and official synod publications are prioritized to ensure fidelity to the institutional voice and internal discourse of the Church. To ensure historical accuracy and institutional contextualization, the study makes extensive use of primary sources, which include national and regional synodal decrees (e.g., the 1646 *Szatmárnémeti* canons, the 1791 *Erdődi* resolutions, and the 1881–82 Debrecen Synod), legal documents issued by the Hungarian Diet and the Habsburg court (e.g., the 1790 Act XXVI and the 1859 Protestant Patent), as well as theological writings and speeches by key figures such as Imre Révész and Albert Bereczky. These documents are not only cited for factual content, but also analyzed in terms of their language, legal logic, and theological assumptions, allowing for a layered understanding of institutional intent and ideological adaptation.

1.3.3. Thematic and Comparative Analysis

Beyond the chronological narrative, the study employs thematic analysis to trace the evolution of key concepts, such as the following:

- The notion of “church autonomy” (*ecclesia libera in libera republica*);
- The role of the presbytery and lay leadership;

- The ecclesiastical significance of confessional identity (especially in contexts of persecution or co-optation);
- The functional meaning of the presbyterian-synodal system under changing political regimes.

When appropriate, comparative elements are introduced. These compare the Hungarian Reformed Church's institutional development with parallel Reformed traditions (e.g., the Dutch or Scottish Presbyterian Churches), particularly in terms of lay involvement, state influence, and responses to authoritarian rule. This comparative lens allows for better identification of what is uniquely Hungarian in this institutional trajectory.

1.3.4. Research Limitations

This study is primarily institutional and legal-historical in scope and does not provide a sociological or ethnographic account of Reformed religious practice at the grassroots level. While it refers to theological and ideological positions of individual actors, it does not constitute a work of systematic theology. Moreover, due to source availability, the focus is on official church structures and public ecclesiastical discourse, rather than on clandestine or unofficial religious movements.

In applying this methodology, the study aims to offer a rigorous and verifiable reconstruction of how the Hungarian Reformed Church preserved core theological principles within a shifting legal and political environment, and how its institutional responses reflected broader trends in the negotiation of power, identity, and faith.

2. The Church Organization at the Beginning of the Reformation

At the outset of the Reformation in Hungary, it was the Lutheran branch that initially spread across the country (Gergely et al. 1997, p. 55).¹ The Lutheran Reformation placed primary emphasis on doctrinal purity, and the restructuring of ecclesiastical organization did not play a central role—this was likewise the case in Hungary.² While Reformed ecclesiology was, from the outset, deeply concerned with institutional design—particularly the development of the presbyterian-synodal model—Lutheran theology initially placed less emphasis on questions of church governance. The early Lutheran movement prioritized doctrinal clarity and the proper administration of the Word and sacraments, often expressing a degree of ambivalence toward rigid institutional frameworks. However, this orientation shifted over time. Martin Luther's later writings reveal increasing concern with ecclesiastical order, and the establishment of the office of superintendent, along with the formation of consistories under territorial churches, reflects a growing institutional consciousness within the Lutheran tradition. As Eric Gritsch (2002) notes in his *History of Lutheranism*, Luther's ecclesiology evolved toward greater structural engagement, particularly in his later career and in the administrative models developed by his successors. This more nuanced view highlights that Lutheranism, too, eventually developed a coherent framework for church governance, albeit along different theological and political lines than the Reformed tradition. At the first Hungarian synods, disciples and followers of Luther and later of Melancthon declared their separation from Roman Catholicism.³ The fact that Hungarian Protestantism did not initially follow the Reformed path can be attributed to several reasons, primarily rooted in historical circumstances. The most decisive factor was Hungary's feudal social structure, in which only the nobility was counted as "citizens", i.e., subjects endowed with legal rights. In this social environment, the prerequisites for the operation of a city-state democracy such as that of Geneva were entirely absent.

Ferenc Bajusz identifies three further reasons behind the organizational alignment with the Lutheran direction. The first was the defeat at the Battle of Mohács and its consequences. Most of the Roman Church's bishops and leaders perished at Mohács, and many of the

survivors became adherents of the Reformation. These individuals retained their former ecclesiastical roles and automatically became overseers—such as archdeacons or deans—of the new pastors. From this structure emerged what later became known as “fraternities” or deanships. Thus, at the beginning of the Reformation, the medieval structure of the Roman Church was simply adopted.

The second reason cited by Bajusz is the impact of the large number of Hungarian students returning from Wittenberg, who brought back with them the idea of a consistorial church system. However, this model could not be implemented domestically, as Hungary lacked a Protestant prince who could exercise the rights of a *summus episcopus*. This was only possible in Transylvania. Moreover, Lutheranism did not emphasize the visible church or its juridical organization. The most critical concern was the purity of doctrine and the confessional stance.

The most decisive obstacle, however, according to Bajusz, was the rise of Unitarianism, which he identifies as the strongest hindrance to the establishment of a Reformed church system. Led by Ferenc Dávid, Unitarianism attacked emerging Calvinism from within. Under pressure from all sides, the early Hungarian reformers did not dare introduce elements of the Reformed church polity (Bajusz 2004, pp. 263–64).

At the time of the first synods, no formal confession of faith had yet been adopted, nor were there newly founded congregations. The legal status and administration of parishes remained unchanged; governing authority continued to be exercised by the patron and the superior ecclesiastical body. The state authorities also recognized legal continuity, collecting tithes and distributing them to Protestant preachers much as they had previously done with Catholic priests. The governance of each parish, together with its pastor, was overseen either by the patron or by a local leadership body appointed by the pastor and village authorities. While the members of these bodies were typically Protestant due to the religious homogeneity of the villages, they cannot be regarded as independent or elected leaders of the congregation (Csohány 1994, pp. 16–22).

The appearance of the Helvetic tradition in Hungary can be dated to around 1540, when the views of Ulrich Zwingli and Heinrich Bullinger began influencing the course of reform.⁴ The impact of Reformed Reformation was felt primarily in theology and theory, as the historical, social, and economic conditions of Hungary were markedly different from those of Geneva.⁵ As a result, Hungary followed a distinct historical trajectory and developed a unique church institutional system. This system bore only a structural resemblance to foreign models, its closest counterparts being found in the constitutions of the Hungarian Lutheran and Unitarian churches.

The early synods issued decisions concerning church organization. In 1545, at the Synod of Erdőd, held contemporaneously with the Council of Trent, Articles X and XI rejected the doctrine of apostolic succession, declaring that the only head of the Church is Jesus Christ. At the 1550 Synod of Torna, a superintendent (bishop) office was established following the German model, and rules were laid down for church visitations. Based on this, in 1551, Mihály Hevesi, a pastor from Szatmár, was elected superintendent, following the example of the presbyters of Alexandria in Egypt. In 1554, the Synod of Óvár responded to its ninth question by resolving that “superintendents and high priests (deans)⁶ must be appointed to ensure unity in doctrine and liturgical practice, and to maintain proper discipline” (Kiss 1881).⁷

The second Synod of Erdőd, held in 1555, contained specific provisions concerning the pastoral office, affirming the Church’s autonomous jurisdiction and asserting that the word of God holds greater authority than any man, bishop, synod, or even the Church as a whole. The synodal decree stipulated that only a person deemed fit by the superintendent and his colleagues—and certified as such⁸—could be elected to church service, and that

one could only assume office with the consent of the dean.⁹ The decree also contained specific rules regarding pastoral duties and disciplinary procedures, obliging pastors and presbyters not only to preach publicly but to teach and admonish from house to house, keeping themselves “free from all guilt”.¹⁰

In the early period, laypersons had no direct role in church governance, and the pastors primarily sought to reform and perfect the existing ecclesiastical structure without fundamentally altering it. One of the most significant figures in the spread of Reformed reform, Péter Méliusz Juhász,¹¹ adhered consistently to Reformed theology (Bajusz 2004, p. 265). He recognized the necessity of a disciplined organizational structure appropriate to Hungarian conditions and supported the office of superintendent as a means of maintaining order among church ministers. The 1561 Debrecen (or Egervölgy) Confession emphasized the principle of the universal priesthood, made little distinction between specific ministerial roles but defined the duties of bishops in detail. It granted the right of electing ministers to the people, including bishops, who were to be chosen and examined by the people and church teachers; however, their installation was to be authorized by the prince, i.e., the secular ruler. The confession also forbade secular jurisdiction by bishops and barred them from holding both ecclesiastical and secular offices.¹² The 1567 Synod of Debrecen¹³ adopted the Second Helvetic Confession and also formulated a comprehensive church ordinance (*Articuli majores*),¹⁴ which became the basis for the Hungarian Reformed church organization, influencing the synods of Hercegszőlős (1576) and Csepreg (1587) (Kiss 1881, pp. 676, 695).

The ordinances established a hierarchical view of church structure. Ministers could only be appointed following thorough examination and public ordination by learned clergy and the superintendent. The superintendent and senior pastors (deans) were placed at the head not only of the church but also over the clergy, presiding over assemblies of pastors and guiding them. The ordinance subordinated school principals, teachers, and other church workers to the pastors. However, Ferenc Bajusz argues that since there were no social ranks among pastors—only authority—this structure should not be considered truly hierarchical.¹⁵

In 1563, the Reformed community in Upper Hungary adopted the Genevan confession of Beza at the Synod of Torda.¹⁶ This Tarcál-Torda Confession called for a church organization modeled on the Reformed pattern. Jesus Christ is declared the sole head of the Church, a role He did not transfer to anyone else. Pastors and teachers were jointly referred to as bishops, ministers, and elders. Pastors were responsible for preaching and exercising discipline through admonition, while teachers focused solely on preaching. The governance of the church was entrusted to the elders, without distinction in rank between them and the pastors. Discipline was the elders’ responsibility, and ecclesiastical penalties involved only admonition with the word of God; excommunication could be declared only by the church council. In practice, however, this organization did not function. The actual structure, as developed by Méliusz, differed in that no superintendent was elected, and governance in four districts (church dioceses) was conducted by senior pastors (deans). The early organization recognized no clerical orders; the pastor was not superior to the church member, and laypersons were not excluded from church governance. However,, the Church could not function without the support of patrons; while the nobility did not participate in synods, they could assert their rights and interests at their own assemblies.

While the Transylvanian Diets of 1527 and 1563 permitted the free practice of four accepted religions¹⁷ (*recepta religio*), Protestant denominations in Royal Hungary continued to face persecution until Act XXVI of 1790–1791 (Hajnal 1914, p. 20). The recognized denominations in Transylvania—Lutherans among the Saxons and Reformed among the Hungarians—created national autonomies that in several respects differed from the self-

governing structures of church districts in Royal Hungary.¹⁸ The Reformed Church of Transylvania maintained its independence until the Synod of Debrecen in 1881, when it was integrated into the unified structure of the Hungarian Reformed Church (Gergely 2001, p. 133).

3. The Development of the Reformed Church in Hungary Organization from the XVII: Century to the End of the XIX

In 1605, the estates of Transylvania elected István Bocskai as their prince at the assembly in Szerencs. Under his leadership—a pious Reformed prince with a European outlook—Hungarians could actively resist Catholic Habsburg domination, which regarded the Kingdom of Hungary merely as an instrument of power. Bocskai clearly understood that only a unified Hungarian state could ensure the nation’s future and that only a Hungarian kingdom reunited with Transylvania would be sufficiently strong to confront the Turks and other adversaries. During the long negotiations preceding the Peace of Vienna, concluded in 1606, the Hungarian estates sought to settle religious matters according to the Transylvanian model, establishing a system based on the recognition of four “received religions” (Bucsay 1995, p. 88).

However, the Peace of Vienna did not bring about a satisfactory resolution. It did not specifically mention the Protestant confessions by name, instead providing only general guarantees for the free exercise of religion—moreover, not for all residents of the country, but only for the nobility, urban citizens, and frontier soldiers. Protestant religious freedom was to be exercised¹⁹ only “without prejudice to the Roman Catholic religion”.²⁰

The provisions of the 1606 Peace of Vienna were codified into law in 1608.²¹ This law expanded and clarified the Protestant right to religious freedom beyond the terms of the Vienna agreement. It extended the right of free worship to villages as well, omitted the “absque tamen” clause²² and declared that every denomination must have its own ecclesiastical leaders. This was the first legal guarantee of ecclesiastical self-government for Hungarian Reformed and Lutheran churches. It meant that the jurisdiction of Catholic ecclesiastical authorities no longer applied to Reformed and Lutheran congregations and pastors (Révész 1938, p. 365).²³ Beyond this, the state did not intervene in organizational matters, and thus, the external order of the church—its structure—essentially remained unchanged.

According to Mihály Bucsay, the Peace of Vienna and the legislation of 1608 represent both the end of one era and the beginning of another. The nation became divided into two camps. The Catholic faction—particularly the clergy—refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of this law, especially the self-governance rights of Protestants. In contrast, a more unified Protestant camp began to emerge, forged together by common hardship and a shared adversary. Reformed and Lutheran Christians ceased to regard one another as opponents, and from this period onward, one can speak of Hungarian Protestantism as a unified phenomenon (Bucsay 1995, p. 91).²⁴

Until the 1881 Synod of Debrecen, which was based on presbyterian-synodal principles, the Hungarian Reformed Church was organized according to two ecclesiastical law codes originating in the seventeenth century. These were established at the Synod of Komját in 1623 and the Synod of Szatmárnémeti in 1646. The canons adopted at Komját were applied in the western regions of the country (Transdanubia and along the Danube), while the codex prepared by Bishop István Geleji Katona on behalf of the Szatmárnémeti Synod was used in Transylvania and in the regions along the Tisza River. Both codices were based on the *Articuli majores*.

The *Canones Ecclesiastici in Quinque Classes Distributi* (Ecclesiastical Canons Divided into Five Classes), adopted at the Synod of Komjât in 1623, became the basis of the Transdanubian church structure. The five classes dealt with the following:

- Bishops, their ordination, and duties;
- Seniors (seniors, i.e., deans);
- Presbyters (congregational pastors);
- Schools;
- Synods ([Bajusz 2004](#), p. 271).

Despite some differences, both codices presented a relatively unified organizational model. Their main divergence lay in the fact that the Komjât canons aimed to implement Reformed principles, whereas the Geleji Katona codex explicitly stated that the Hungarian administrative order differed from those in other countries and did not mandate the establishment of the presbyterial office as compulsory.

3.1. Church Congregations

During the sixteenth century, no presbyteries existed in the Hungarian Reformation. Municipal councils or village judges often dealt with ecclesiastical matters, but not on behalf of the church itself ([Bucsay 1985](#), p. 92). The role of presbyteries began only in the early seventeenth century, and their development, ecclesiastical functions, and composition evolved differently in the western part of the country compared to in eastern and Transylvanian regions. The Tarcál–Torda synods of 1562–1563 already made mention of such bodies, but the first known congregational presbytery that included lay members was established in 1617 in Pápa by senior pastor János Kanizsai Pálfi.²⁵

According to János Csohány, this presbytery was elected by the congregation and functioned independently of the municipal magistracy ([Csohány 1994](#), p. 19). However, reliable sources on the election process are lacking. Endre Tóth suggests that the presbytery was not elected directly by the congregation, but rather appointed with the consent of the local landlord by municipal officials and commanders of the local garrison. Its members came from the “urban order” and the “military estate”. The claim of independence from the city magistrate is contradicted by the fact that, in addition to its twelve elected members, the presbytery also included four ex officio members: the chief magistrate and three sworn officials of the town ([E. Tóth 1995](#), p. 135).

János Kanizsai Pálfi also compiled a set of rules for the presbytery.²⁶ However, most of these regulations did not pertain directly to the work of the presbyters but instead concerned ecclesiastical life in general—marriage procedures, the order of worship services, administration of the sacraments, and funeral customs. Of the seven sections in the rulebook, only the final two addressed the presbyters specifically. According to these, presbyters were considered distinguished church members, exempt from paying *stóla* (a clerical fee), had special burial privileges and were required to visit one another during illness. Their responsibilities included supervising the pastor, the teacher, the school, and the students, and safeguarding their good reputation. Importantly, they were also responsible for overseeing the lives of the congregants. Pastors and teachers could be appointed or dismissed only with the knowledge and approval of the presbytery. Congregational governance was carried out by the presbytery during meetings held in the presence of the pastor, and the decisions made at these meetings were to be recorded in the minutes ([E. Tóth 1995](#), p. 135).

With these measures, Kanizsai Pálfi sought to prevent clerical authoritarianism from taking root within the church. In addition, although pastors were still not chosen directly by the congregation, this development marked the beginning of a path toward congregational self-governance.

The presbytery of Pápa was soon followed by the formation of several others, though presbyteries remained uncommon in the eastern parts of the country. According to Ferenc Balogh, in Upper Hungary, congregations adhered to the Genevan model of church governance, whereas others remained under episcopal rule (Balogh 1903, p. 59). János Csohány notes that during the episcopate of János Kanizsai Pálfi in 1630, the superintendency issued a directive requiring the establishment of presbyteries within the Transdanubian bishopric, but this model was not adopted elsewhere. Imre Révész evaluated the Transdanubian presbyteries as serious and effective disciplinary bodies, consistent with Reformed tradition, and noted their active participation in church governance (Révész 1925, p. 37).

In Eastern Hungary and Transylvania, the emergence of presbyteries is linked to movements initiated by pastors seeking to fully implement Reformed principles. The first movement against episcopal governance (episcopalism) arose among English Reformed communities in 1592 (Balogh 1903, p. 59; Collinson 1990). Their goal was to replace episcopal oversight with a presbyterian form of governance. In Hungary, the first to oppose episcopal leadership was Imre Szilvásújfalvi Anderkó, a teacher in Debrecen and later pastor and dean in Nagyvárad. In 1608, he argued that bishops were unnecessary and that episcopal authority led to clerical domination. Due to these reformist views, the bishop of the Transtisza region, Lukács Hodászi, initiated disciplinary proceedings against him. The synod convened in Nagyvárad removed Szilvásújfalvi from his pastoral office. However, his congregation soon reappointed him, whereupon he renewed his attacks on the episcopacy, prompting Hodászi to appeal to the Prince of Transylvania, Gábor Báthory. In 1612, a court composed of both secular and ecclesiastical judges sentenced Szilvásújfalvi to removal from office and imprisonment (Balogh 1903, p. 60).

The key figure of the Hungarian Puritan movement and presbyterian ideal was János Tolnai Dali, who studied first in Franeker (the Netherlands) and later in England, where he became acquainted with the Puritan principles of the Scottish Reformed Presbyterians. Upon his return to Hungary, he and his associates aimed to establish a presbyterian church constitution (Balogh 1903, p. 60). In response to foreign influences, synods held in Debrecen and Sárospatak in 1638 resolved that pastors returning from abroad must take an oath not to introduce innovations regarding confessions, rituals, or church discipline without the consent of the national synod.

After his return, Tolnai Dali was appointed teacher in Sárospatak by Prince György Rákóczi I, but he refused to take the required oath. He could assume his position only through the support of secular nobles. Once appointed, he introduced new texts such as Peter Ramus's liberal logic and Amesius's—William Ames (1576–1633)—Puritan theology (*Medulla Theologiae*—*The Marrow of Theology*) and began promoting Puritan principles. His core beliefs included the following:

- The offices and authority of bishops and deans should be abolished as they lead to clerical domination and contradict the Reformation;
- All pastors are equal;
- Congregations should be governed by presbyteries elected from among the church members;
- Only Sundays should be observed as holy days, and all other holidays should be abolished;
- No confessions of faith are necessary; only Scripture should guide belief and morality;
- The sacrament of baptism should be administered exclusively in church;
- Families should conduct household devotions to cultivate religious piety;
- Education should be conducted in Hungarian rather than in Latin (Balogh 1903, p. 61).

Initially, Tolnai Dali gained followers among the youth and later as a pastor in Tokaj. This led to resistance from defenders of the old order. While many pastors feared deviations

from the Gospel, the opposition of the Reformed nobility proved even more decisive. As the Puritan movement spread in Hungary, presbyteries composed of lay members—including serfs—were established in the Transtisza and Cis-Tisza superintendencies (Csohány 1994, p. 19). This, however, created significant social tension. The nobility refused to accept a system in which they would co-govern with or be judged by their own serfs.²⁷

In Transylvania, where both the prince and the estates were largely Reformed, the state exercised extensive influence over the church. In effect, this created a system akin to a state church.²⁸ The state legislature directly regulated church affairs, and the synod of pastors was only permitted to deliberate on minor issues (Bajusz 2004, p. 273).

The Synod of Tokaj in 1646 suspended Tolnai Dali from his office. He appealed to the prince, and despite support from Zsigmond Lónyai and Zsuzsanna Lórántffy, Prince György Rákóczi I and his court were not sympathetic to English-influenced ideas—particularly as this was the very period during which Presbyterians and Puritans were launching a revolution against the monarchy in England.

The national synod convened in Szatmárnémeti on 10 June 1646, under the presidency of Bishop István Geleji Katona and attended by representatives of the Prince of Transylvania and the two Tisza church districts, removed János Tolnai Dali and eight of his pastoral supporters from office. The synod also adopted several resolutions (conclusiones) in defense of episcopal church governance.²⁹ The core of these decisions was as follows: the episcopal office and church government must be maintained; the deaneries of the Cis-Tisza region must also elect bishops; the celebration of major church holidays must continue; the confessions of faith shall remain those of the Second Helvetic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism; the use of the term “Puritan” is forbidden; and pastors, teachers, and instructors are to be subordinated to the deans (Balogh 1903, p. 26).

The Geleji Katona canons defined the scope of the presbyteries in Canon XCIX, but did not make their establishment mandatory, nor did they prohibit it. Consequently, the formation of presbyteries did not result from universal regulation but rather from local reforms, which explains their slow and inconsistent development. The canons continued to uphold the principle that church governance, administration, and discipline fell exclusively within the jurisdiction of pastors, and of the ecclesiastical bodies and synods composed solely of pastors (Révész 1993).

The formation of presbyteries, however, soon became inevitable due to the effects of the Counter-Reformation, which rendered administration of congregations by landlords and civil authorities increasingly unworkable. Responsibility for managing material affairs thus remained with the pastor and the congregation. Even in Eastern Hungary and Transylvania, where parts of the Reformed Church had survived the Counter-Reformation, presbyteries began to form, albeit slowly (E. Tóth 1995, p. 140).

In addition, the decline in the number of national diets that addressed church matters led prominent noblemen—who had previously supported the Church—to demand a more direct influence in ecclesiastical affairs. In the early eighteenth century, the establishment of consistories and the emergence of the office of curator strengthened the role of lay members within the Reformed Church and promoted their participation in governance and church judicature.

Following the enactment of Act XXVI of 1790–1791, the synods held in Buda and Pest formally declared the principle of parity between clergy and laity in church governance, and mandated the establishment of presbyteries (Bucsay 1985, pp. 186–87). However, these canons did not attain the force of law due to the lack of royal approval. As a result, another hundred years would pass before an ecclesiastical law formally confirmed the laity’s participation in church governance and ecclesiastical judicature. This milestone would be achieved at the constitutional synod of Debrecen in 1881–1882.

The church constitution adopted by the General Synod of the Reformed Church in Hungary in Debrecen in 1881–1882 declared in §2 that the Church governs and organizes itself according to the presbyterian-synodal system. Section 19 stated that internal congregational affairs were to be managed by a presbytery elected by the congregation. Furthermore, Chapter II, which dealt with the organization of ecclesiastical judicature, specified that church judicature at the congregational level was generally to be exercised by the presbytery itself. In larger congregations, the presbytery could elect a church court composed of five to ten of its own members for a fixed term.

At the district level, the ecclesiastical court was chaired by the dean and the district inspector, and consisted of both clerical and lay judges. At the regional level, the court was headed by the bishop and regional chief curator, and composed of clerical and lay judges. The supreme court of the General Synod was similarly composed of elected members from among both clergy and laity (S. Tóth 1882, pp. 238–56). These provisions formed the core of every subsequent church constitution and related legal regulation concerning the functioning of the Church.

3.2. Church Districts

The canons of both Geleji Katona and the Synod of Komját agreed in stipulating that the pastors of each church district were to elect a dean from among themselves. The election of the dean required the bishop's approval, and the elected dean was officially installed by the bishop, with the consent of the other deans and following a formal oath of office.

The dean was responsible for governing and administering the church in accordance with the canons, although his authority was limited. He could supervise the lawful functioning of the individual congregations but could not interfere with the specific duties and powers of the pastors. The dean exercised his supervisory role by conducting church visitations, usually in the company of two or three others. During such visitations, he evaluated the work of the pastors by questioning both them and the congregation members.

The dean was obliged to convene the assembly of the pastors of the church district at least three times a year. These assemblies exercised disciplinary authority and handled ecclesiastical judicial matters. They also examined candidates who were to be licensed or ordained as pastors. Church districts could establish internal regulations for their own operation, which allowed for diverse modes of church governance. It was owing to this flexibility that presbyteries could be established in various districts even in the absence of a general, compulsory directive.

3.3. Church Regions

The head of regional church governance was the superintendent (i.e., bishop). Superintendents were elected from among the pastors themselves. Their responsibilities included the governance of the districts under their authority, the supervision of schools within their region, and the oversight of church benefices. Although the superintendent was the regional leader, he was considered equal in rank to the deans and was expected to treat them with due respect. He could not assume their powers or responsibilities.

The superintendent was obliged to regularly visit his church region, examining each church district at least once every three years. These visitations were held at the seat of the dean, where all pastors from the district were to be summoned. Following the dean's examination, the superintendent would also inspect individual congregations.

The superintendent was further required to convene the regional synod once a year. At this meeting, newly elected pastors were officially installed after a rigorous oral examination. The synod also served to hear and adjudicate appeals and other judicial cases brought before the superintendent.

In the Transtisza region, no superintendent was elected until 1734. Until that time, church governance in that area was administered solely by the deans.

3.4. Formation of Non-Pastoral High Offices

During the seventeenth century—particularly in the Transdanubian regions where the canons of Komját were applied—the establishment of presbyteries became increasingly widespread. This was largely due to the fact that pastors needed the support of the laity, especially those who were actively involved in church affairs. In contrast, within the Principality of Transylvania, where the Reformed Church enjoyed the patronage of Reformed princes, there was less dependence on lay support.

Following the dissolution of Transylvania's autonomy in 1690, the Diploma Leopoldinum³⁰ issued in the same year formally guaranteed religious freedom for all recognized denominations. However, under the new Catholic monarchs who replaced the Reformed princes, the church could no longer count on state support. Furthermore, the diets (parliamentary sessions) that used to deliberate church matters were convened less frequently. In order to retain the support of the noble elite and to ensure their continued influence over church matters, the Supremum Consistorium was established in 1709. This supreme church council was led by the bishop and three noblemen acting as chief curators.

It was also deemed necessary to appoint curators at the district level, selected from among the local aristocracy. As a result, the office of curator became a cornerstone of the Transylvanian church constitution and was eventually adopted in regions west of the Carpathians as well.³¹

In Royal Hungary, following the Treaty of Szatmár (1711), a chancellery decree issued in 1716 banned the convening of synods. From that point forward, church regions and districts were only permitted to hold smaller assemblies. The first Carolina resolutio,³² issued on 21 March 1731, acknowledged the Protestants' right to elect superintendents. However, among several restrictions, it stipulated that these church leaders could only exercise authority over the discipline of clergy and placed the laity under the jurisdiction of secular authorities.

The second Carolina resolutio, issued on 20 October 1734, somewhat eased the burdens imposed by the first. It again allowed for the election of superintendents but required that no additional financial burden be placed on the people. This necessitated the support of influential lay patrons. Accordingly, the convent held in Bodrogkeresztúr on 5 November 1734 resolved to formalize the role of prominent laymen in defending the church. It mandated the election of chief curators for each of the four church regions and an additional general chief curator.³³ It also required that coadjutors (assistant lay leaders) be appointed to serve alongside the deans in each church district (Bajusz 2004, p. 280).

These decisions were implemented in all regions except for the Transtisza region, where strong resistance arose against the introduction of the lay curatorial office. According to Ferenc Bajusz, the reason for this resistance was that the church in this area lacked noble patrons and thus had minimal lay influence over ecclesiastical affairs (Bajusz 2004, p. 280). It was not until 1785 that the Transtisza region recognized the voting rights of patrons, and even then, only counts, barons, and senior officials were deemed eligible (Bajusz 2004, p. 280).

In this region, Miklós Sinai, a professor at the Debrecen Reformed College, and his followers asserted—based on both Scripture and the Church Fathers—that exclusive governance of the church belonged by divine right to bishops and pastors. Drawing also on historical arguments, they rejected “the always disruptive and apostolically inconsistent influence of the laity in church governance” (E. Tóth 1995, p. 283).

In contrast, the nobility drew upon Enlightenment philosophy to assert lay rights in church governance, citing the theories of Samuel von Pufendorf. In his 1687 work *De habitu religionis* (*On the Disposition of Religion*), Pufendorf applied the principles of natural law to religious institutions. He defined the church as a voluntary association (*collegium seu societas*) formed by individuals to engage in communal worship. Since the community was founded through the free will of its members, they all possessed equal rights in its governance, and authority resided only in those to whom it had been entrusted by the community itself (E. Tóth 1995, p. 286).

This notion of the church as a voluntary association was subsequently incorporated into constitutional drafts prepared in the late eighteenth century.

During the preparatory phase of the 1790–1791 Diet, the wealthy lesser nobility, which sought to increase its influence in church governance, aimed to secure its position through the forthcoming royal charter and religious legislation (E. Tóth 1995, p. 283). Their proposals provoked significant indignation among the pastors of the Transisza Reformed Church. At the initiative and under the leadership of Miklós Sinai, a delegation was sent to the monarch, and in the submitted memorandum, they firmly rejected any form of lay influence in ecclesiastical governance.

The dispute between the lay nobility and the clergy flared up again in the Transisza region following the death of Bishop István Szathmári Paksi, in connection with the filling of the episcopal seat.³⁴ The pastors, excluding the laity, elected Miklós Sinai as bishop. He was immediately sworn in and installed by the consistory composed of deans, and the clergy then appealed to the monarch for confirmation of the election. In response, the lay nobles convened a new episcopal election assembly for 28 June 1791, nominating Ferenc Hunyadi as their candidate. In their circular letter, they condemned the pastors' unlawful procedure and called upon the congregations to vote.

As a result of the election conducted with lay participation, Ferenc Hunyadi was elected bishop. Due to the mutual complaints submitted by both parties, the monarch appointed Baron József Orczy as royal commissioner. Based on his report and under the influence of the leading Protestant aristocracy, the monarch confirmed Ferenc Hunyadi in the episcopal office (E. Tóth 1995, p. 287).³⁵

3.5. The First National Synod

In order to resolve the disputes that had arisen during the implementation of the resolutions of the Bodrogkeresztúr convent—and to prevent future conflicts—the Reformed estates at the 1790 Diet sought to settle the contested issues through national legislation. Act XXVI of 1790 granted members of both the Augsburg and Helvetic Confessions the free exercise of their religion.³⁶

In Article 4, the monarch permitted Protestants to be subject solely to their own religious superiors, while reserving for himself the right to regulate the internal statutes of the individual churches. This provision made possible the holding of synods with both clerical and lay participation. Although the king retained supreme supervisory authority over the churches, he allowed them to operate in religious matters in accordance with canons established by their own confessional synods, provided these conformed to the stipulations of the law. These canons could not be altered by government decrees or royal edicts.

The law permitted the convocation of synods but subjected the number of participants, the matters to be discussed, and the location of the synod to prior royal approval. Within the scope of his supervisory authority, the monarch had the right to send a royal commissioner (**homo regius**) to attend the synods. Synodal resolutions could only become legally

binding with royal assent. Thus, this system provided only a limited or nominal autonomy to the Protestant churches, which remained under state oversight.³⁷

In matters of marriage, both Reformed churches were allowed to exercise judicial authority through their own ecclesiastical courts,³⁸ although the procedural rules had to be submitted for royal approval.

Both Protestant churches made use of the right to convene synods, calling their respective assemblies for the same day—the Lutherans in Pest and the Reformeds in Buda. The preparatory process was carried out so closely in parallel that the draft resolutions of the synods were nearly identical in wording. Although the synodal decisions were adopted in the presence of royal commissioners, the king refused to approve them, and thus they did not attain legal status. Nevertheless, they served as precedents for church legal practice and, as customary law, played a significant role in shaping ecclesiastical organization.

According to the Buda Canons, local congregations were governed by a presbytery composed of the patron (the Reformed benefactor of the congregation), the pastor, the curators, and the presbyters. The canons precisely defined the duties of the presbytery: to ensure the proper solemnity of worship, oversee schools, provide for the free education of the poor, distribute alms, care for the needy, manage church property and income, and regulate the remuneration of church officials. The presbytery also held the right—subject to confirmation by higher ecclesiastical authorities—to elect schoolteachers and cantors, and to exercise church discipline to a certain degree (Varga 1995, p. 291).

The district unit, previously referred to as dioecesis or tractus (i.e., deanery), was headed by a senior (dean) and a lay inspector (curator). They were assisted by assessors (ecclesiastical judges), elected in equal numbers from clergy and laity, who, together with the senior and inspector, formed the district council. The members of the consistories were elected by local presbyteries.

The tractus formed larger units called superintendencies, which handled more significant matters at convents. Members of these superintendential convents included the superintendent, the chief curator, one lay and one clerical notary, the seniors and curators of each tractus, and one lay and one clerical delegate from each district. The superintendential convent elected four lay and four clerical assessors to assist the superintendent and chief curator; these assessors formed the consistory of the superintendency.

Legislative authority within the church was vested in the synod, which was to be convened every ten years. In addition to the superintendents and chief curators, its members were elected by the presbyteries (Bajusz n.d., pp. 169–72; Szentpéteri Kun 1948, pp. 77–82; Varga 1995, pp. 288–93).

3.6. The Imperial Patent

Following the defeat of the 1848–1849 Revolution and War of Independence, during the period of retribution, General Haynau issued a military order in 1850 that abolished the office of chief curator within the church districts, prohibited the election of superintendents and appointed administrators to fill vacant superintendent positions. These administrators were instructed to govern the Church together with a few ecclesiastical figures, without convening assemblies.

In 1854, the imperial governor-general proclaimed a set of regulations issued by the Imperial and Royal Ministry of Religious Affairs, which repealed Haynau's earlier decree but continued to prohibit the election of chief curators and bishops. Except for presbyteries, all ecclesiastical assemblies required the presence of a political commissioner, and the appointment of pastors and teachers required political approval. The decree referred to Article 4 of Act XXVI of 1790, which stated that, for the final regulation of ecclesiastical matters, the state would consult the churches.

In 1855, the government summoned several Protestant churchmen to Vienna, presented them with a draft law and asked for their opinion. The invitees, however, declared that they lacked the authority to provide such an opinion. In response, the government published the draft law, but both the Lutheran and Reformed churches rejected it.

Consequently, on 1 September 1859, the Emperor issued his proposal in the form of an open imperial decree—known as the Protestant Patent. This decree abolished the pre-1848 autonomy of the Protestant churches and laid down the fundamental principles of church constitutions. It declared that detailed regulations would be the responsibility of synods, but until such synodal decisions were made, the Minister of Religious Affairs would govern the Protestant churches by ministerial decrees. The very next day, such a decree was issued.³⁹

The decree sought to reorganize the structure of the Hungarian Reformed Church along the lines of the Rhenish-Westphalian model in Germany. Under its provisions, the local congregation was governed by a presbytery and a local convent. The presbytery was composed of the pastor, the curator, elders, church stewards, and deacons—all elected by the local convent, except for the pastor. Their terms lasted six years, with half of the body renewed every three years.

In addition to managing financial matters, the presbytery was responsible for maintaining discipline and caring for the poor. The pastor presided over the presbytery; if there were multiple pastors, the eldest presided. The presbytery also elected delegates to the deanery convent.

In congregations with fewer than 1000 members, the local convent consisted of all eligible church members. In larger congregations, members over the age of 25 elected representatives every two years for six-year terms, with one-third of the body renewed biennially.

The deanery convent included the dean, the curator, all pastors, and an equal number of elected lay delegates from congregations, along with members of the deanery consistory: the dean, the curator, the associate dean, two clerical assessors, and three lay assessors. This body exercised judicial authority in marital cases. The convent's resolutions were prepared by the deanery consistory and approved by the superintendent.

Both the deanery convent and its consistory were presided over by the dean and the curator. The dean and associate dean were elected by the congregational presbyteries for eight years, while the other consistory members were elected by the deanery convent for four years.

The decree increased the number of superintendencies from four to six, each with a designated seat. The superintendential convent convened under the joint leadership of the superintendent and the chief curator at the superintendency's seat. Its members included deans, associate deans, district curators, one lay representative per district, gymnasium principals and one teacher from each, the director of the teacher training institute, and all faculty members of the theological college.

Superintendents and their deputies were elected by the presbyteries. However, their election required confirmation by the monarch, and all decisions of the superintendential convent had to be submitted to the Minister of Religious Affairs for approval before implementation.

The superintendential consistory, elected by the convent, included, in addition to the presiding officers, the deputy superintendent, two clerical and three lay assessors, and one lay notary, and one clerical notary. This body prepared decisions and exercised judicial authority.

The decree also required both Protestant churches to hold a general conference. Its members included the superintendent and deputy, the chief curator, and one lay delegate.

The eldest superintendent presided. This body was tasked with preparing decisions and adjudicating church matters.

A synod was to be convened every six years at the recommendation of the general conference, upon the call of the Minister of Religious Affairs. Its members were the superintendents and their deputies, the curators of the superintendencies, two clerical delegates, and three lay delegates. The synod elected its own chairpersons—one from among the superintendents and the other from among the lay delegates. The monarch did not send a royal commissioner to attend synod sessions. All adopted proposals and minutes had to be submitted to the Minister of Religious Affairs.

The highest court of ecclesiastical jurisdiction was the supreme ecclesiastical tribunal, whose organization was to be determined by the monarch. The churches received state subsidies, the use of which was monitored by the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

Although this system outwardly appeared to be based on elections and seemed to guarantee ecclesiastical autonomy, the Church ultimately rejected it. In reality, it offered only the appearance of autonomy, as church leaders could only take office with royal approval, and all ecclesiastical officeholders were required to swear an oath of loyalty to the monarch. The Patent thus stripped Protestantism of its essential rights to self-government, assembly, and public expression—rights that had been its lifeblood.⁴⁰

As a result, the system was never implemented. Faced with growing resistance, it was formally repealed on 15 May 1860 (Szentpéteri Kun 1948, pp. 87–92).

3.7. *The Constitutional Synod of Debrecen, 1881*

After the revocation of the Patent, the Protestant churches began restoring their constitutions at the level of individual church regions. Retaining the committee that had been assembled during the resistance to the Patent, a body convened in Debrecen in September 1860, marking the beginning of the constitutional drafting process.

Following the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867, representatives of the Transylvanian Reformed Church began participating in all national Protestant assemblies. In the interest of unifying the church, the convention adopted a proposal by Albert Kovács, professor of theology in Budapest, aimed at reforming the structure and competencies of the general convention. The proposed change would have required church districts to delegate representatives in proportion to population size. However, the church districts rejected this plan.

Ultimately, upon the initiative of the Transtisza region, the 1877 convention appointed a committee to prepare for a constitutional synod. The committee worked in two sub-committees: one prepared a draft concerning the structure and rules of procedure for the synod, while the other drafted the proposed laws to be debated. After deliberation, the compiled document—including a draft law on ecclesiastical judicature—was submitted to the convention, which convened the synod for the discussion of these matters on 31 October 1881.

The first general synod of the Hungarian Reformed Church was composed of 114 delegates, evenly split between clergy and laity, and proportionally distributed according to population. Thirty-four delegates came from the Transtisza district, eighteen from Transylvania, sixteen from Mid-Danube, fourteen from Cis-Tisza, and twelve from Transdanubia. In addition, each church district's bishop and chief curator were members of the synod, along with two school delegates per district.

The synod elected dual presidents—one from among the bishops and one from among the chief curators—and held sessions from 31 October to 24 November 1881, and again from 10 to 17 September 1882. The legislative proposals adopted during the second session were approved by the king on 11 October 1882, thereby acquiring legal force.

The significance of this synod lies primarily in the fact that it produced the first unified constitution of the Hungarian Reformed Church, bringing together the entire Reformed community of Hungary within a single organizational framework. The official name of the unified body became the Evangelical Reformed Christian Church in Hungary. The constitution stipulated that the Church would govern itself according to a presbyterian-synodal system.

The constitution consisted of two main parts: the first regulated the structure of church organization, including the election of pastors; the second addressed ecclesiastical judiciary procedures. In order to strengthen unity, the synod also established a National Church Fund to support congregations in need.

The constitutional structure specified four levels of church governance: the congregation, the church district (diocese), the church region, and the general synod. It also created an Interim National Convention to oversee church administration and implement synodal decisions between synods. This convention's president was not identical with that of the synod itself; instead, the role was filled by the senior bishop by age, in accordance with tradition (S. Tóth 1882).

3.8. The Budapest Synods up to the Second World War

According to the 1881 church constitution, a synod was to be convened every ten years. In line with this provision, a total of five synods were held in Budapest before 1945.

Exactly ten years after the adoption of the constitution—and coinciding with the centenary of the 1790–1791 Act on religious freedom—the first synod was convened in Budapest on 5 December 1891. Utilizing the experiences of the previous decade, this synod revised and amended the laws adopted at the Debrecen Synod. It incorporated into the legal code the legislation on public education, which had been omitted in Debrecen. Following royal approval in 1893, the law came into effect in 1894.

Ten years later, in 1904, the second Budapest synod convened. It held seven sessions and again reviewed the church's legal statutes. Instead of issuing a unified legal code, it enacted nine separate laws to regulate the foundational legal framework of the church.⁴¹ These included separate laws on the church constitution and organization, the election and legal status of pastors, church taxation, the national church fund, ecclesiastical judiciary procedures, the structure of public education, the national pastoral pension system, pastoral care for church members living abroad, and the enforcement of church laws in the Croatian-Slavonian territories. All legislative acts were ratified and promulgated in 1907.⁴²

The third Budapest synod was convened in 1917 on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of the Reformation. However, the outbreak of the First World War prevented the synod from implementing structural adjustments aligned with the unified church organization. Its most notable accomplishment was the introduction of a unified hymnal.

After the consolidation of the post-Trianon situation, the fourth Budapest synod convened in 1928 and remained in session until 1937. It held a total of seven sessions. During the first six, nine legislative acts were adopted, two of which were entirely new laws: one regulated missionary work and the other addressed pastoral care within the armed forces. These laws were approved by the Regent on 31 October 1933 and came into force on 1 January 1934.

During the seventh session, two additional laws were passed: Act X established a judicial body to resolve administrative and property-related disputes between the Reformed and Lutheran churches, while Act XI amended and supplemented previously enacted laws. On the basis of this latter act, the Presidential Council of the General Convention was created as an advisory body.

By the late nineteenth century and into the interwar period, the Reformed Church had become an established denomination. Its bishops were members of the Upper House of Parliament *ex officio*, its doctrines were protected by the state, and the mandatory church tax paid by members was collected through official channels. The Church was authorized to provide religious instruction in state schools, was exempt from property taxation and received state funding for clergy salaries and school maintenance. In exchange, the Church offered loyal support for the state order.

After centuries of struggle, the status of the Church had become stable and institutionalized—yet at the cost of adopting a more bureaucratic and formal character.

The fifth Budapest synod convened on 1 March 1939. Its principal focus was the reintegration of the Reformed congregations in the Transylvanian territories that had been regained.

4. The Restructuring of the Church Organization in the Post-World War II Years and in Socialist Society

The resolutions concerning the reintegration of territories reannexed during the Second World War lost their validity as a result of the peace treaties concluding the war. This was affirmed by a 1947 resolution of the Synod, which declared that the Reformed Church in Hungary consists of those Reformed Christian congregations located within the territory of Hungary, and thus comprises four church districts.

Turning points in human history have always prompted the Church to reflect and respond, and this was no different in Hungary after the Second World War. The Church was compelled to undertake serious self-examination—primarily theological in nature⁴³—regarding its activities before and during the war. Inevitably, this also raised structural and organizational questions. In light of broader societal transformations, various reformist currents emerged within the Church, expressing a desire for spiritual renewal and criticizing the post-1881 church structure, which had increasingly assumed the character of a public institution.

These reformist groups united individuals from diverse backgrounds.⁴⁴ Some, inspired by the ideals of social justice, envisioned a new order grounded in Christian teaching—such as the Alexandrians, led by Sándor Karácsony.⁴⁵ Others were motivated by deep personal wounds resulting from the persecution of Jews. In addition, as in every period of upheaval, there were also those whose actions were driven by personal ambition (Gombos 1992).

This loosely organized reformist alliance convened in Nyíregyháza between 14 and 17 August 1946, and established the National Reformed Free Council. In his opening address, Albert Bereczky emphasized the following (Bereczky 1946, p. 26):

“It is not a separatist faction of Hungarian Reformed believers that is holding its meeting and deliberation here, but a community of the Church, as defined by the interpretation of the Heidelberg Catechism—that is, according to the Word of God—which, with a sense of responsibility before God and guided solely by the standard of His Word, humbly seeks the path toward the renewal and future of the Mother Church.”

With these words, he essentially sought to reject any accusations of schism, insisting on the right of this assembly to address pressing ecclesiastical matters independently of official church bodies and in the absence of a formally convened synod. He claimed this right on theological grounds (Bereczky 1946, p. 9):

“The first and primary question is not what the Church says—whether to its own members or to the world—but what God says to His Church. [...] And let us

declare, with the utmost seriousness and force, that it was God who spoke to the Church at the Free Council.”

At the same time, the official church leadership did not remain passive. It also sought a model of operation compatible with the newly emerging social order and oriented itself toward the future. On 15 April 1946, Imre Révész, then Bishop of the Transtisza Church District, published a set of twelve theses in the *Debreceni Protestáns Lap* under the title “A Free Church in a Free State”. In this document, he offered proposals for redefining the relationship between church and state and submitted them for public debate.

These theses were soon adopted by János Victor, a theologian closely associated with the evangelical revival movement and later one of its leading ideological figures. Victor republished the theses in his self-founded journal “Our Service”, launching a national-level discussion that lasted until November 1946.

In his theses, Révész advocated for a church that engaged actively with social and secular life. He called on the state to recognize and respect such an engagement. He proposed a normalization of church-state relations based on several key principles:

- The state should eliminate distinctions between “established” and “recognized” denominations;
- It should abolish religious compulsion, including the existing legal framework governing the religion of children;
- It should cease providing financial support to churches and religious communities;
- It should discontinue the state-supported collection of church taxes;
- It should inquire into citizens’ religious affiliation solely for statistical purposes.

Révész proposed a ten-year transitional period after the passage of the relevant legislation, during which churches would be expected to prepare for autonomous operation and secure their own financial foundations. At the same time, he called upon the state to provide compensation of enduring value—in the form of capital assets and without offending national honor—for church and school properties expropriated during land reform.

He also called for the formation of a confessing church. According to his vision, full church membership should be reserved for individuals who personally confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Redeemer in accordance with the church’s confession of faith. Such members would bear witness through regular worship attendance, participation in the Lord’s Supper, active engagement in the church’s ministry, a serious Christian lifestyle and character, acceptance of ecclesiastical discipline, and voluntary, regular financial support of the church.

Only such committed members, he argued, could ensure the true independence of the Church in relation to the state, and only such a church could guarantee that it would not endanger social justice or political equilibrium. Furthermore, only through such members could a genuine missionary spirit and sense of responsibility arise within the church—one capable of awakening and evangelizing those who belonged to the Church merely in name.

Révész concluded the following (Révész 1946, pp. 3–4):

“We must strive for a free church that is simultaneously a confessing church and a missionary church. Naturally, in such a church, any further organizational and administrative reforms must proceed in a confessing and missionary spirit—logically and gradually—as part of the transformation of church membership, according to the biblical foundations of the presbyterian-synodal system and its most valuable historical examples.”

Marxist historiography also considers Imre Révész’s published works to be a realistic programme, in which a precise understanding and approval of the essence of democratic transformation prevailed. It embodies the principle of gradualism and contains elements

of mutual trust and patience. It is particularly noteworthy that it was presented at a time when the state had not yet put any of the minor issues concerning the relationship between the state and the church on the agenda (Kónya 1967, p. 103). During the debate, both supportive and completely dismissive views were expressed, but the debate presumably also determined the outcome of the Free Council's work.

The Free Council conducted its work through five working committees, the findings of which were synthesized by a body called the General Committee. The committee responsible for organizational questions—designated as Committee “C”—affirmed its commitment to correcting structural deficiencies within the Church.

Regarding church membership, the committee declared that the congregation is a community of faith and love among believers in Christ. Members of this community are jointly responsible for ensuring the spiritual and material conditions necessary for the Church's life and mission. The committee introduced the concept of “responsible church membership”, which it defined as having both internal and external criteria.

The internal criterion is a living faith in Christ.

The external criteria include the following: baptism, confirmation, regular attendance at the preaching of the Word, participation in the common bearing of burdens, active engagement in ministry, participation in the Lord's Supper, obedience and accountability in church discipline, and a verbal or written declaration of this responsibility.

By doing so, the committee rejected the existing practice of defining church membership on the basis of civil registration and residence. Instead, it proposed that individuals wishing to remain members of the Church should submit a written declaration affirming their acceptance of these criteria.

Recognizing the historical reality that the presbyterian-synodal principle had never been fully implemented in the organizational life of the Hungarian Reformed Church, the committee declared that the time had come to immediately undertake a comprehensive restructuring of the Church's governance.

The committee recommended setting a fixed four-year term for all senior ecclesiastical offices and stipulated that no one should be eligible for re-election after their term expired. With this, the long-standing Reformed resistance to episcopalism once again found expression (Bogárdi Szabó 1995, p. 24).

Turning to financial matters, the committee asserted that the Church must achieve complete financial independence, ultimately covering its expenses through the sacrificial giving of its members.

On the matter of ecclesiastical discipline, the committee clearly stated that Jesus Christ, as the head and king of the Church, rules over it and disciplines it through His Word and Holy Spirit. This disciplinary authority is not transferable to anyone else. The congregation may exercise discipline only as Christ's representative. Therefore, church discipline is to be exercised by congregations, not by individuals. Acting on behalf of the congregation, the presbytery bears the responsibility for both discipline and governance.

Church discipline, the committee emphasized, is to be understood exclusively as a pastoral task, to be applied only to responsible church members, and only in accordance with the method prescribed in Matthew 18.

However, virtually none of these reform ideas were realized in practice. In 1948, the state began its campaign to dismantle the churches. According to Gyula Gombos's analysis, the Hungarian Reformed Church at that moment faced three possible paths:

Total resistance: In accordance with Reformed convictions regarding individual liberty, the Church could have opposed the dictatorship of Bolshevism, which demanded absolute obedience and operated as a religion of its own—one that claimed the entirety of the human being. However, such resistance would have demanded heavy blood sacrifice and

martyrdom, something that could not reasonably be expected of the Church's leaders at the time.

A retreat into a kind of spiritual ghetto: In this scenario, the Church would withdraw behind the walls of its temples, renouncing its evangelical mission to the world. Though reduced to silence, it would continue to provide spiritual sustenance to those who sought it out, remaining faithful to its divine foundation.

Total collaboration and subservience: This would allow the Church to preserve its external institutional existence by surrendering its spiritual integrity. In this way, it might retain its organizational structure, a fraction of its institutions, some clergy, and church buildings—but it would lose the pulpit, the essential space from which the Word of God is proclaimed (Gombos 1992).

The state and the Communist Party, in pursuing their goals, had no interest in a truly democratic presbyterian-synodal church structure. Instead, they required bishops who could exert authoritarian control over the Church. For this purpose, Albert Bereczky, with his theology of the “narrow path” and his alignment with reformist opposition figures, proved to be a willing partner (Kónya 1988). He and a small group of like-minded individuals ultimately chose the third path—that of collaboration.⁴⁶

After the resignation of László Ravasz, Bishop of the Danubian Church District (Pap 1992, pp. 63–83), in April 1948, Bereczky was appointed in his place and by July became the chief leader of the Hungarian Reformed Church. That same June, the Synod accepted a twenty-year concordat with the state and acknowledged the nationalization of its schools (Gombos 1992, pp. 24–105).

The decentralization of power—advocated by the Free Council and intended to reduce the influence of the General Convention and the episcopal offices—had become politically obsolete.

Bereczky later defended his actions and those of his supporters by interpreting the postwar transformations as part of a vast, divine process. He wrote the following (Bereczky n.d., p. 13):

“It is shocking how unaware so many Church officials and large segments of our membership remain of the colossal transformation taking place in human life—unprecedented in both depth and scope. Never before has there been such a revolutionary reordering of existence, so intent on condemning and replacing the old forms of life. [...] This is not merely vertical but also horizontal in scale: no single idea system has ever stirred the souls of hundreds of millions as this one now does. Our Church, by God's judgment and mercy, lives in a place where it is no longer a question which side of these gigantic contending forces it belongs to. We are the Reformed Church of Hungary, whose earthly life and service are wholly bound to the fate of the Hungarian people. He went on to argue that the Church had been divinely called to serve in this specific historical and geographical context—not between East and West, but in the East, and that it must accept the birth pangs, struggles, and constructive tasks of this global transformation as a gracious opportunity from God. I have accepted this gracious opportunity—and in it lies my continual liberation.”

With this declaration, Bereczky effectively asserted that the persecution and martyrdom of the early Christians, as well as the suffering of the Hungarian Reformed pastors condemned to galley slavery, were meaningless and unnecessary. In his interpretation, the essence of Reformed Christianity was no longer the acknowledgment of God's sovereign authority or belief in His redemptive love, but rather the service of another earthly power.

One need only substitute the word “God” in Bereczky's statements with “the Communist Party” to grasp the true nature of his message. There is no mention of church

autonomy—the very principle for which generations of Protestants had fought. Nor is there any reference to the constitutional principle of the separation of church and state, despite the fact that debates over Imre Révész’s twelve theses had taken place in 1948.

Bereczky also seemed to forget that the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* (whose realm, his religion)—the notion that the ruler determines the religion of the realm—is not a Protestant doctrine. Moreover, he could not plausibly claim ignorance of how the Eastern Bloc viewed churches. By that time, the relevant ideological writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Kautsky, and Stalin were all widely available, and the violent policies of the Soviet Union were well known.

Earlier Protestant thinkers had already warned of this danger, urging the Reformed Church to prepare for its relationship with socialism in a theologically and strategically coherent manner (Pokoly 1910, p. 527). Historically, the Reformed Church had not been indifferent to social problems; indeed, in the spirit of Calvinism, it had previously articulated concrete social programs as part of its mission (Kónya 1967, pp. 45–53).

In 1933, István J. Kováts argued the following (Kováts 1933, pp. 26–29):

“Social issues have not only been challenging our social structure for decades—they have been knocking on the doors of the churches as well. We cannot, like ostriches, bury our heads in the sand and wait for the storm to pass. That which is legitimate and just in these movements will assert itself—either with us or against us. It would be foolish to allow it to do so without our participation. If we struggle with true evangelical zeal for the realization of those aspects of socialism that are compatible with the teachings of Christ, then we will be all the more capable of resisting those socialist goals that are in conflict with divine and human law.”

Kováts analyzed the roots of socialism’s hostility toward the Church and defined how the Church should relate to ideologies deemed dangerous. He wrote the following:

“Christianity, by its very principles, cannot ally itself with either extreme of the social movements. One extreme seeks to free the individual from all societal constraints and elevate them to an absolute ruler over a toppled society. This is the anarchism based on absolute individualism. The other extreme completely subjugates the individual to society. This is the consistently constructed front of Marxist socialism—communism. Christianity, nearly two thousand years ago, liberated the individual, but placed that freedom in the service of the community. It created a sound middle path between the individual and society, honoring both equally. One of its chief commandments—‘love your neighbor as yourself’—includes both individual and communal interests. This is a great law of social balance. Any ideology seeking to tip this balance in either direction is, by definition, an enemy of Christ’s Church.”

He continued by reflecting on historical experience:

“Wherever communism, even briefly, came to power, one of its first objectives was the complete destruction of the churches. The 1919 communist regime in Hungary immediately severed all ties between church and state, ended state support, grouped clergy with the insane in legal terms, and even established agitator-training schools for clergy who had abandoned their churches.”

In light of all this, Bereczky might still have hoped that socialism would bring about a more just society or provide solutions to pressing social issues. However, any improvement in the Church’s status under such a regime was highly unlikely.

With their collaboration—and therefore their responsibility—the process began that virtually annihilated the moral education indispensable to the healthy functioning of

society, offering nothing in its place to Bereczky Albert's beloved people. The Church lost its autonomy entirely and, with it, its freedom of action. The error and sin did not consist in compromise, servility, or the unconditional service of an anti-ecclesiastical ideology, but rather in the emergence of a Hungarian society stripped of values by so-called "socialist" morality and in the dissolution of Reformed identity within it—an outcome which, even if they did not live to see it, they surely had to anticipate. Bereczky and his associates lost what Calvin so highly esteemed in the Reformation: the notion of free obedience, according to which a person is free who does not submit to all things or all powers. This freedom entails the capacity to distinguish between the God of salvation and every other power that likewise claims our obedience. The freedom recognized by Bereczky was not this freedom. Bereczky and his circle forgot the words of the Geneva oath and what Calvin wrote in his commentary on David.

From 1948 onwards, the Reformed Church in Hungary was centralized to an extent unprecedented in its history. In stark contradiction to the traditions of Hungarian Calvinism and existing ecclesiastical law, the removal and transfer of parish ministers became standard practice. To legalize this, the Synod passed two new acts: Act II of 1951⁴⁷ permitted the transfer of a pastor in the Church's interest during ecclesiastical judicial proceedings, even if no fault was found with the pastor, the presbytery, or the congregation,⁴⁸ Act V of 1953 enabled the filling of vacant pastoral positions not by election, but by appointment. The bishop, who also presided over the ecclesiastical court, thus gained the power to remove any pastor at will. Through Act III of 1952⁴⁹, the structure of the Church, comprising four dioceses and twenty-nine church districts, was altered: the Diocese of Cis-Tisza was merged into the Diocese of Trans-Tisza, and nearly thirty percent of the districts were eliminated. By organizing clergy circles that essentially resembled secular seminars and by distributing pre-written sermon outlines tailored to political demands, the proclamation of the Word was also standardized; it was no longer possible to preach the Word freely and rightly. Within eight years, the Church seemed on the verge of ceasing to exist as a true Church.

With Act I of 1951⁵⁰, the state established the State Office for Church Affairs. Through this body, the state exercised the so-called *ius supremae inspectionis*, or supreme supervisory right, which extended to ecclesiastical legislation, church education, and governance. The purpose of this right was ostensibly to ensure that the Church applied its own laws and regulations in harmony with state law and observed its own statutes—in short, that it operated lawfully. In modern terms, the *ius supremae inspectionis* amounted to a form of legal oversight. In reality, however, this meant that nothing could occur within the Church that was not permitted or approved by the government. The leaders and officials of the ÁEH were present at meetings of the Convent, Synod, dioceses, and at all Church events. The state also consistently applied a particular form of this supervisory right—the *ius placeti*—requiring state approval, exercised by the ÁEH, for any ecclesiastical legislation to take effect. The state secured these prerogatives by asserting—and abusing—its right to determine the conditions, extent, and manner of financial support to the Church. The periodic threat of withdrawing this support proved an effective means of controlling the Church, already stripped of its material base. As István Bogárdi Szabó aptly observed, under totalitarian conditions a dual guarantee system operated in church–state relations: the state guaranteed the position and influence of the church leadership it had pre-approved and permitted to be elected, while the church leadership guaranteed that it would govern the Church according to the state's political intentions. In this way, a form of Byzantinism emerged: the Church, led by its bishops, became a servant of the empire (Bogárdi Szabó 1995, p. 25).

In the spring of 1955, those within Hungarian Reformed circles who did not identify with the church leadership or with their concept of a "serving Church" issued a declaration

entitled *The Confessing Church in Hungary*. Of the declaration's four points, the fourth is especially significant regarding church governance, as it emphasized the importance of the presbyterial-synodal principle:

"We must brand as false all dictatorial clique-rule within the Church, as it amounts to the usurpation of Christ's lordship. And when our present church government seeks to enforce its decisions within the Church by means of intimidation commonly used in the world, and, despite the open resistance of congregations, imposes certain persons upon congregations by force of power, while others—because they disapprove of or criticize the direction proclaimed by the church government—are forcibly removed, transferred, or deprived of their positions on fabricated charges, all this only demonstrates daily that they have chosen the 'false' path."

This clandestinely distributed statement, also sent abroad, sparked a nationwide movement. The demands focused primarily on calling for new elections based on presbyterial-synodal principles and on the immediate removal of church leaders who were operating contrary to the true nature of the Church.

After 23 October 1956, the revolutionary events swept away the compromised church government. On November 1, at the assemblies of the four dioceses, a National Executive Committee was elected. It was declared that they still regarded László Ravasz, as President of both the Synod and the Convent, and János Kardos, who had been lawfully elected multiple times but ultimately removed through arrest, as the rightful leaders. Both were asked to take over the direction of church affairs. Preparations for new elections began—efforts that continued even after the revolution was crushed in blood. At its meeting on 21 December 1956, the Synod Council resolved to restore the Diocese of Cis-Tisza and ordered the reorganization of the Convent.⁵¹ The National Executive Committee dissolved itself but transformed into the Renewal Movement. In its redefined program, the chapter on church constitution affirmed its commitment to the presbyterial-synodal form of church governance, rejected all forms of dictatorship and advocated strengthening the congregational principle. Concerning the relationship between church and state, they declared the following:

"The Church has not received a mandate from its Lord to intervene in the concrete affairs of state administration—for the state is the state, and the Church is the Church. At the same time, it is our faith and conviction that only harm and loss can result for both sides if the state, seeking to enforce its own demands, ideas, and plans within the Church, interferes in the Church's affairs, organizational matters, order of service, or even attempts to modify or define the message entrusted to the Church by its Lord."

Under the pressure of state coercion and the veiled threat of immediate withdrawal of state financial support, the movement was forced to retreat. Both Bereczky and János Péter were "repented of" by their dioceses and recalled to their episcopal seats. Bereczky accepted; János Péter declined.⁵²

On 24 March 1957, the Presidential Council of the People's Republic enacted Decree No. 22 of 1957, requiring state approval for filling certain church positions. Appointments and dismissals of the Church's senior officials required prior consent from the Presidential Council; those of educational institution leaders, from the Minister of Culture; and from 1959, the President of the State Office for Church Affairs (ÁEH).⁵³

From 6 October 1960, the President of the Synod and of the Convent became one and the same by office, making the leadership of the Church's legislative and executive bodies identical and thereby unquestionably centralizing the Church structure.

Act I of 1964 abolished the Universal Convent, merging the legislative and executive branches of the Church. The rationale for this decision lacked any legal expertise, conflating the necessity of separating powers with the need to distinguish legislative and executive tasks, and employing historical distortions typical of political rhetoric, purporting to reflect popular demand—though clearly serving political aims that required a strong, centralized, single-handed structure:

“Our church constitution established the Universal Convent to manage the common affairs of the dioceses. In our legal regulations, it was impossible to adequately delineate the respective powers of the Synod and the Universal Convent; this duality caused overlaps, confusion, and unnecessary costs in various areas of church life over the decades. In practice, these disadvantages were mitigated by the identical leadership of the two bodies. Therefore, from its establishment to the present, unifying these powers has appeared as a popular demand. The extension of the Synod’s powers accords with our Church’s presbyterial-synodal governance principles. Proper application of this law will further strengthen our Church’s unity while also serving the self-government of congregations, church districts, and dioceses. As a result, our church governance will become simpler and more economical. Further measures arising from this law should be undertaken during the next general review of our church constitution.”

From that point, the bodies and titles were as follows:

- (a) Synod of the Reformed Church in Hungary;
- (b) Presidency of the Synod of the Reformed Church in Hungary;
- (c) Presidential Council of the Synod of the Reformed Church in Hungary;
- (d) Synod Council of the Reformed Church in Hungary;
- (e) Synod Court;
- (f) Synod Office;
- (g) Synod Counsellor;
- (h) Head of Department and Lecturer of the Synod Office.

As a result of this proclaimed constitutional reform, six acts were adopted in 1967:

- I. On the Reformed Church in Hungary and its Service;
- II. On the Constitution and Governance of the Church;
- III. On Church Ministers and Their Employment;
- IV. On the Church’s Finances;
- V. On the Reformed Pastoral Pension Institute;
- VI. On Church Judiciary.

Act II defined the competence of the Synod as the legislative, decision-making, and supreme executive body of the Reformed Church in Hungary. Consequently, the Synod became the central organ for both legislation and execution. The task of the Synod Council was to manage synodal responsibilities not falling within the scope of legislation. According to the wording of the law, the Synod Presidential Council was responsible for directing the handling of matters affecting the entirety of the Reformed Church; however, its resolutions were only advisory for the Presidential Council. If five members of the Synod Presidential Council opposed the decision of the Synod presidency regarding the handling of a matter that could not be postponed until the next regular meeting of the Synod Council, the presidency was obliged to convene an extraordinary meeting of the Synod Council. This provision implied that, otherwise, the independent handling of matters belonged to the Synod presidency. The decisive role of the members of the presidency was further evident in that they presided over all bodies—thus, apart from legislation, the Synod was effectively identical to the Synod Council. The functions of the Synod Council could be taken over

by the Synod presidency, and the Synod Council needed to be convened only if there was significant opposition to a proposed measure. In practice, no such example is known, and given the nature of leadership selection and the personality cult surrounding leaders, none could be expected.

According to Act III on the election of ministers, a nomination committee was formed under the chairmanship of the bishop and chief elder of the diocese, consisting of the deans and elders of the church districts, a representative of the theological academy, and a delegation of two to four members from the consistory of the congregation concerned. This committee proposed one, possibly two or three, candidates for the ministerial office. If the nominee was not elected, a new nomination followed. If that also proved unsuccessful, the bishop would appoint one of the candidates as acting minister. If within a year the congregation still did not elect this candidate, the district assembly elected the minister. Therefore, only those could become ministers who enjoyed the unconditional trust of the bishop and the deans. Since the presidents of church courts were the dean and elder at the district level, the bishop and chief elder at the diocesan level, and the presidents of the Synod at the Synod Court level, the top leaders exercised unlimited supervisory rights over ministers. They did so while continually emphasizing presbyterial-synodal principles. In this respect, one must agree with Jos Colijn's assessment (Colijn 1996, p. 115), who characterized the behavior of church governance as "ecclesiastical Stalinism":

"Not only because the church leaders needed the help of the Stalinists to maintain their power, but also because a striking feature of this actual ecclesiastical system was that real power was held by a narrow group that, through refined means of intimidation, pressure, reward, and manipulation, gathered a larger group of collaborators around them, whom they could direct at will."⁵⁴

5. The Political Transition

The societal changes reached the churches in 1989, when, on 30 June, Decree-Law No. 14 of 1989 was adopted. This decree repealed Decree-Law No. 22 of 1957 on the state's approval required for filling certain church offices, as well as Government Decree No. 23/1971 (VI. 2.) implementing it and Provision No. 1/1971 (X. 15.) of the State Office for Church Affairs concerning its execution. It also annulled Decree-Law No. 25 of 1959 on the establishment of the State Office for Church Affairs, the amending Decree-Law No. 11 of 1967, and Government Decree No. 33/1959 (VI. 2.) implementing Decree-Law No. 25 of 1959, along with amending Decrees No. 41/1986 (X. 11.) and No. 12/1986 (IV. 22.), §27 (2). The Council of Ministers was authorized to determine organizational and jurisdictional issues concerning the performance of state tasks specified by law in relation to the operation of churches, denominations, and religious communities, and the practice of religion. Negotiations began between church and state leaders to reconsider their relations. As a result, even before the new parliamentary elections were held, with prior state approval, the Grammar School of the Reformed College of Sárospatak, along with all of its properties integrally linked to the College, was returned to the maintenance and ownership of the Reformed Church District of Cis-Tisza on 20 March 1990.⁵⁵

Among the first actions of the newly elected Parliament was the adoption of Act IV of 1990 on freedom of conscience and religion, which eliminated almost all possibilities for state interference in church life. However, the need for state support remained, and this was not changed by Act XXXII of 1992 on the restitution of former church properties. Under this law, only properties directly related to religious life and still in state or municipal ownership at the time of the law's entry into force could be returned to church ownership, and the law has not been fully implemented to this day. A turning point in ecclesiastical

legislation came with Act I of 1990, which amended certain provisions of the electoral law. The preamble to this act justified the legislation as follows:

“Driven by the aim that presbyterial-synodal principles should prevail in the organizational structure of our church, that church bodies and office-bearers should be elected in accordance with the broadly expressed will of the congregations, and that, through all this, the spiritual and organizational renewal and strengthening of our church should be promoted, until such time as a full review and renewal of our ecclesiastical code can take place, the Synod deems it necessary to amend certain electoral provisions of the current code.”

This wording indicates that the act was intended solely to govern the conduct of the first elections, with the aim that the newly elected bodies would carry out reforms that could no longer be postponed. Under this act, the nomination for offices elected by consistories became the task of the district assembly, and the president was to be elected by secret ballot from among those present, with one minister and one elder serving in that capacity. Elections in the consistories were also conducted by secret ballot. The newly reconstituted Synod soon began preparations for comprehensive legal reform, formulating its theses, and after lengthy negotiations, Act II of 1994, the new constitution of the Reformed Church, was adopted.

6. Conclusions

The organizational history of the Reformed Church in Hungary, spanning from the Reformation to the mid-twentieth century, presents a complex narrative of adaptation, resistance, and institutional creativity. While the early Hungarian Reformation initially followed Lutheran patterns, it gradually adopted Reformed theological and ecclesiastical models, albeit in ways uniquely suited to the Hungarian feudal and legal environment. The presbyterian-synodal principle—central to Reformed ecclesiology—took hold unevenly across regions, influenced by noble support, theological currents, and political pressures. By the late nineteenth century, the unification of church governance through the Debrecen Synod of 1881 provided a coherent constitutional framework grounded in the Reformed tradition. However, the Church’s hard-won autonomy came under renewed threat in the twentieth century, particularly during the post-World War II era, when authoritarian state control imposed new challenges. Despite these pressures, the Reformed Church in Hungary remained committed to its core theological convictions and organizational principles. This study highlights the enduring tension between ecclesiastical freedom and external power, demonstrating that the Reformed Church’s journey was not only a struggle for institutional survival but also a sustained witness to its spiritual and theological identity.

The institutional history of the Hungarian Reformed Church illustrates the enduring tension between theological ideals and political constraints. Throughout the centuries, the Church consistently endeavored to implement the presbyterian-synodal system as a reflection of its Calvinist identity. However, these efforts were frequently challenged or obstructed by external forces—from the Counter-Reformation and imperial absolutism to modern authoritarian regimes. The resulting organizational structure bears the marks of both continuity and adaptation, revealing how ecclesiastical autonomy was preserved, reshaped or curtailed, depending on the prevailing political context.

This long trajectory sheds light on the broader patterns of church–state relations in Central Europe, where religious institutions have often operated under conditions of restricted autonomy. The Hungarian Reformed Church, in particular, demonstrates how a confessional community could preserve its theological and institutional distinctiveness, even while navigating sustained political interference. Its experience reflects a model of resilience grounded not in political power, but in confessional coherence and institutional memory.

The historical legacy of the Church's struggle for self-governance continues to inform its contemporary identity. Debates surrounding the role of lay participation, the interpretation of the presbyterian-synodal system, and the Church's position in relation to the state remain relevant today. In a secular and pluralistic society, the historical awareness of past compromises and resistances may serve as a critical resource in maintaining both theological integrity and responsible public engagement.

Funding: This scientific communication was created with the support of project ME-TKTP-2025-ME-TKTP-2025-091, funded within the framework of the Scientific Excellence Support Program of the University of Miskolc.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

- ¹ His reception was characterised by the fact that § 45 of the 1523 Diet of Buda stipulated as follows: The king, being a Catholic prince, shall punish all Lutherans, their supporters and followers as public heretics and enemies of the Blessed Virgin Mary with death and confiscation of their property. Quoted from: (Lippay 1935, p. 39).
- ² Jenő Zoványi Lutheran ideas appeared early on, but since Luther himself initially saw hope that the reform of the church could be carried out without schism, the emergence of the reformist organisation can only be dated to when the schism became a fait accompli (Zoványi 1921, p. 19).
- ³ The 1545 synod in Erdőd was presided over by István Kopácsi, who was initially the head of the Franciscan Minorite monastery in Sárospatak, and then in 1532 became a student of Melanchthon at the University of Wittenberg.
- ⁴ Bullinger's Hungarian connections are indicated by the reformer's correspondence and the books he sent to Hungary. His authoritative presence in the Hungarian Reformation was established by two writings that he wrote and sent directly at the request of the Hungarians (Bucsay 1985, p. 64).
- ⁵ István Kónya considers the emergence of Calvinism in Hungary to be a "special historical phenomenon" (Kónya 1975, p. 16).
- ⁶ The word *esperes* comes from the Latin word *senior*, which is the equivalent of the Greek *presbyteros*. Ferenc Bajusz points out that the term *presbyter* found in early 16th-century canons is not identical with the lay office in the Reformed Church today, which, according to Calvin, is a church administrator who does not perform pastoral duties or preach, following the example of the Bible and early Christianity (Bajusz 2004, p. 268).
- ⁷ Ferenc Bajusz discusses the organisational changes in detail in his works, including (Bajusz n.d., pp. 140–41; Bajusz 2004, pp. 264–65).
- ⁸ In today's terms, this served to demonstrate the necessity and proof of internal and external calling, and can thus be considered the predecessor of today's pastoral examination.
- ⁹ The emergence of the institution of *concessa*.
- ¹⁰ Acts 20:26. Furthermore, the decisions of the Synod of Erdőd, Article VII in (Kiss 1881, p. 37).
- ¹¹ Péter Méliusz Juhász came from a commoner family and attended school in Tolna from 1549. He had two Lutheran teachers, then from the end of 1552 to 1554, István Kis of Szeged, who probably taught him the Helvetic Confession. From 25 October 1556, he continued his studies in Wittenberg, where he was elected senior member of the *Coetus Hungaricus*, a community of Hungarian students living and working there, and also obtained a master's degree. He translated Calvin's Catechism, edited his own Catechism, and revised it to conform to Calvin's, but according to Mihály Bucsay, his views were more influenced by Bullinger. For more details, see (Bucsay 1985, p. 64).
- ¹² Debrecen Confession, section entitled 'Count the duties of bishops', points 13, 14, and 20 (Kiss 1881, pp. 185–87).
- ¹³ On the significance of the Synod of Debrecen, see (Bölcskei 1991, p. 14).
- ¹⁴ The rules established at the Synod of Nagyvárad in 1576 are only an excerpt from those of Debrecen, which is why they are referred to as *Articuli minores* to distinguish them.
- ¹⁵ For a detailed assessment, see (Bajusz n.d., pp. 154–55; Bajusz 2004, p. 265).
- ¹⁶ The synod began in Tarcal and then continued in Torda, together with the Transylvanians.
- ¹⁷ Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, Unitarian.

- ¹⁸ *Dósa* (1863) deals with the organisational issues of Transylvanian Reformed Christianity and presents the structure of the church organisation in detail.
- ¹⁹ The religious provisions of the peace treaty are explained in (*Révész* 1938, p. 361).
- ²⁰ “Absque tamen praeiudicio Catholicae Romanae religionis.”
- ²¹ The Peace of Vienna of 1606 was incorporated into state law by Act I of 1608. For an analysis of its provisions, see also (*Heiszler* 1862, pp. 97–98).
- ²² “Ut quae libet religio suae professionis superiores seu superintendentes habeat statutum est.”
- ²³ Under this legal provision, Protestants in the north-western Highlands also came under the authority of their own superintendent, rather than the former Roman Catholic bishop (*Bucsay* 1995, p. 90).
- ²⁴ In the early days, Hungarian Reformed and Lutheran Christians were organised in a joint organisation under joint leadership. At the 1587 synod in Csepreg, the Reformed and Evangelicals jointly drafted 27 canons, but in 1591, also in Csepreg, a schism occurred, and István Beythe remained only the bishop of the Reformed. The Lutherans of Transdanubia formed an independent diocese in 1598, but did not elect a bishop until 1612. Until then, they lived in a deanery association similar to the Reformed Church in Transdanubia. The organisational schism was completed by the Lutheran synod in Galanta in 1592, the double colloquium in Késmárk, and finally the assembly in Kisszeben in 1599 (*E. Tóth* 1995, p. 132; *Boleratzky* 2004, p. 183). József Farkas dates the separation of the denominations to the 1560s, when the Protestants of the Upper Tisza region made decisions leaning towards Calvinism at the Synod of Tarcál (1562), while in Transylvania, the Saxons and Hungarians separated into different denominations at the synods of Torda in 1563 and Nagyenyed in 1564, with both sides electing their own bishops (*Farkas* 1896, p. 156). Describing the circumstances of the split, Ferenc Bajusz considers the so-called Keresztúri Agenda, issued in 1598 to the Lutheran pastors of Sopron-Vas-Zala counties, to be unworthy of a sister church. Keresztúri Agenda issued to the Lutheran pastors of Sopron-Vas-Zala counties in 1598 as behaviour unworthy of a sister church, which launched a sharp attack on the ‘proclaimers of Calvin’s dangerous teachings’ (*Bajusz* 2004, p. 264). For more on cooperation and schism, see: *Révész* 1938, pp. 146–149, and for the theological content of the debate, see (*Zoványi* 1977, pp. 250–72). *Horváth* (1940) presents the historical relationship between the two denominations and the renewed efforts at cooperation that arose from their shared historical fate.
- ²⁵ Later, in 1633, during the intensification of the Counter-Reformation, Pálfi János of Kanizsa expelled Ádám Batthyány, the former court priest, from Pápa, who subsequently formed a presbytery in Kis-Komárom (*E. Tóth* 1995, p. 96).
- ²⁶ The title of the regulations: Regulations for the external administration of the congregation (*E. Tóth* 1995, p. 135).
- ²⁷ One of the most important tasks of the presbytery in Reformed church governance is to maintain church discipline, i.e., it acts as a judicial forum in matters of church discipline. For compromises due to noble reactions, see the justification of the Geleji-Katona canons and (*Bajusz* n.d., p. 160).
- ²⁸ It is worth highlighting the anti-presbytery statement of György Rákóczi I, Prince of Transylvania, who did so much for the nation and the Reformed Church: ‘I am particularly averse to the presbytery because, according to it, the peasant would judge the nobleman.’ Published by Pál Medgyesi: *Dialogus Politico-ecclesiasticus*, Bártfa 1650. Quoted by (*Kováts* 1948, p. 209).
- ²⁹ Reformed church historians, such as Endre Tóth and Ferenc Bajusz, also evaluate the role of Bishop István Geleji Katona positively. Geleji Katona sympathised with Presbyterian ideas, but at the synod, György Rákóczi I vetoed the introduction of presbyteries. Geleji Katona incorporated the decisions of the synod into a law book, which became known as the Geleji Katona Canons. In the preface to the law book, Geleji Katona explained that the establishment of presbyteries seemed difficult, even impossible, to the prince, and others also claimed that they were only necessary in the early churches until there were enough pastors, and that the church fathers always understood pastors to be presbyters (*E. Tóth* 1995, p. 139; *Bajusz* 2004, p. 276).
- ³⁰ Leopold I’s charter, which guaranteed Transylvania the rights and freedom of worship of the four established religious denominations.
- ³¹ Based on his research, Jenő Zoványi assumed that although the office did not yet officially exist, Pál Ráday had been performing the universal duties of chief administrator associated with the office since 1708, but more likely since 1712. He sees the most reliable evidence of this in the fact that at the convention held in Bodrogkeresztúr on 5 November 1734, a year and a half after Ráday’s death, the decision to establish the office of chief and assistant administrator was recorded in the minutes, the irreplaceable loss of Mr. Pál Ráday, chief administrator of the Swiss churches in Hungary, was acknowledged in the first line of the justification (*Zoványi* 1903, pp. 2–3, 11; *Bajusz* 2004, p. 277).
- ³² Charles III’s decision regulating Hungarian Protestant affairs.
- ³³ István Kenessey was appointed to the Upper Danube and Transdanubian church districts to be merged, István Gyürky to the Lower Danube church district, which had already been merged with Baranya, András Jobbaházi Dőry to the Tiszáninneri district (where the convention was held), and Sámuel Báji Patay to the Tizántúli district. Count József Bethlen, a Transylvanian magnate, was elected universal chief administrator (*Zoványi* 1903, pp. 12–13).
- ³⁴ Bishop István Szathmári Paksi died on 2 March 1791 during the synod.
- ³⁵ It should be noted, however, that the secular nobility, referring to the so-called Polish dissident canons, did not want to implement Calvinist Presbyterian church government, but rather to obtain exclusive rights for the nobility in the administration of the church by pushing the clergy, the bourgeoisie and the serfs into the background. Although extreme kyriarchy did not prevail, its

influence can be felt in the canons of Pest and Buda. Thus, in the first main part, when discussing church government, they talk about the main authorities, and only later do they mention the powers of pastors in maintaining church discipline. The Buda canons state that the governance and protection of the church is the duty and responsibility of the patrons.

That is, the Lutherans and Calvinists. [Irinnyi \(1857\)](#) discusses the creation of the law and its provisions in detail. The introductory lines of the law read as follows: “When the estates and orders recognised it as just, for the sake of establishing lasting harmony and unity among themselves, that within the borders of Hungary, religious matters should be restored solely on the basis of the laws of 1608 and 1647, and that consequently, both the Augsburg as well as the Lutheran natives who follow the Helvetic Confession, the basis and cornerstone of their permanently restored freedom of religious practice shall be the Peace of Vienna, contained in Article I of the aforementioned 1608 pre-coronation law and incorporated into the law book, as well as the Peace of Linz, incorporated into Article V of the 1647 law. and incorporated into Article V of the law; Therefore, with the gracious approval of His Holy Majesty (without any objection from the clergy and some of the Catholic secular lords, and indeed without any power whatsoever), it is hereby decreed.

With regard to the relationship between the state and the church, this system remained in force in various forms until 1989, when the State Office for Church Affairs was abolished.

Until 1731, the four dioceses of the Reformed Church had their own ecclesiastical marriage courts, which were abolished by the Carolina Resolutio. According to Article 11 of the law: “All marriage matters of Lutherans of both confessions shall be left to their own ecclesiastical courts; However, His Majesty, in accordance with his royal office, having heard both confessions of the Evangelicals, shall provide in advance for a suitable means not only to ensure that the ecclesiastical courts are properly organised for the comprehensive security of the litigating parties, but also that the principles according to which the ecclesiastical courts shall adjudicate matrimonial disputes in due course, shall be submitted to him for supervision and confirmation. Under Act XXVI of 1790, jurisdiction over mixed marriages was transferred to ecclesiastical courts, which gave the Catholic Church considerable influence over the personal affairs of people of other faiths ([Stipta 1998](#), pp. 82–83). Section 16 of the Act states: In addition, lawsuits arising from marriages that were mixed at the time of their conclusion, as well as those that became mixed as a result of one party converting to the Lutheran religion, shall fall under the jurisdiction of the Catholic courts, as both cases involve actual sacraments.

The patent consisted of a total of 58 paragraphs, while the ‘implementing decree’ was a voluminous piece of legislation containing very detailed regulations. Viennese humour depicted the relationship between the two in a satirical drawing: The picture showed a thin, emaciated Beamter carrying a pile of papers under his arm with the inscription: ‘das sind die Gesetze’ (these are the laws), followed by a two-horse carriage loaded with documents bearing the inscription ‘und hier sind die Erläuterungen’ (and here are the explanations). Quoted from: ([Ballagi 1892](#), pp. 4–5).

Let us look again at Géza Ballagi’s statement, reminiscent of Viennese humour, regarding the assessment of the patent ([Ballagi 1892](#), p. 5): “The twelve-page, quarter-sized form, which contained the imperial open order itself, was nevertheless more serious in content than a cartload of ‘Erläuterung’; so serious that it threatened to crush the mighty edifice of the Protestant Church.”

Church Laws in the Reformed Church of Hungary, Official Publication of the Reformed Church of Hungary, Debrecen 1906.

In the royal confirmation clause of the laws enacted by the synod of the Reformed Church, the state expressed that it would not assume any obligations beyond those established. The synod responded to this clause with a solemn declaration protesting against any interpretation of the approval and confirmation clause that could establish obligations for or against the church outside of state legislation, or could prevent the full implementation of Act XX of 1848. This protest was formulated by István Tisza, who was still considered courtly at the time ([Szentpéteri Kun 1948](#), p. 5).

One of the most important issues was the Church’s attitude towards fascist ideas, the assessment of its attitude towards the Holocaust, and the conclusions and consequences drawn from this. Bereczky wrote: “Those who committed crimes against an unarmed, defenceless minority in violation of specific laws belong before the people’s courts. But everyone is also obliged to openly examine what they failed to do to prevent the terrible cruelty and horrific mass murder. The question of responsibility must also be raised by the evangelical churches themselves, as they are the appointed representatives of Christ’s teachings in the world. What did they do to prevent the implementation of one of the fundamental programmes of Nazism, the complete extermination of the Jewish people? To what extent did they fulfil the tasks that the Lord of the Church prescribed for them in the Gospel with regard to the Jews? Bereczky’s assessment, published in 1945, lists the Reformed responses to the Jewish laws from 1938 onwards. In doing so, he praises the activities of László Ravasz, highlighting the unified Reformed rejection of the third Jewish law, László Ravasz’s personal conduct, his approach to the governor and Interior Minister Keresztes-Fischer following Edit Br. Weisz’s request, and his continuous efforts on behalf of the Jews until the end of the Arrow Cross period ([Bereczky 1946, 1945](#)). In contrast, Imre Kádár, in his work published in 1957 after the events of 1956, devotes many pages to proving László Ravasz’s anti-Semitism. See ([Kádár 1957](#), pp. 72–81), and repeatedly in subsequent chapters.

József Éliás, according to the blurb of the book, is a one-sidedly biased author who judges everything on the basis of biblical revelation and truth and does not spare either side from criticism. In his study Christianity and Politics, published in 1947, he writes the following about the fundamental truth of Marxism ([Éliás 1947](#), p. 56): “The reconciliation of consciences is the task and

dear duty of Reformed Christians and Marxists. If Reformed souls also see us as enemies, then we will fight the fight for Christ. Otherwise, Christianity is merely taking up the cause of a human idea, a morally bankrupt idea, and therefore God's righteous judgment will crush it by the opponent. For there is no doubt that in this case God has sided with the 'atheist' opponent."

Sándor Karácsony explains his views on renewal in his collection of essays entitled *Democracy and the Church*: (Karácsony 1946). Albert Bereczky, already bishop of the Dunamellék Reformed Church District, prepared a briefing for foreign delegates participating in the World Synod of the World Alliance of Presbyterians in Amsterdam, entitled *Hungarian Christianity in the New Hungarian State*. This briefing paper was sent out on 5 August 1948 with circular letter No. 5323/1948 to all Reformed parish pastors with the request that they distribute it to their presbyteries for discussion and consideration. After outlining some other possible options, Bereczky explains his position. When asked whether the church can remain a church in a socialist-communist state, he answers yes: "Of course, every Christian can only answer yes to this question. Even those who are convinced that such a state is totalitarian from the outset and does not tolerate the freedom of the church. Even those who are convinced that in such a state the church can only choose between two options: to become a Gleichgeschaltete Kirche (=not a church) or a persecuted church. . . . And we are now testifying that we are currently neither of these two options (Bereczky 1948, p. 16). This became the 'narrow path' between the two options. József Poór conveyed the Marxist approach as follows (Poór 1981, p. 110): "The new church doctrine and praxis were developed between 1945 and 1948. The political change that took place in the Hungarian Reformed Church in 1948 was clearly articulated in the declaration adopted by the Synod Council on 30 April 1948. Among other things, it declared that: 'The old ways of life have disappeared, we do not mourn them, we profess that the new ways of life in Hungary are not alien to our hearts, and we discover in them the framework for a truer and happier Hungarian life ordained by God.'"

29 November 1951, Budapest.

János Péter justified this in his episcopal report delivered at the general assembly of the Reformed Church District of Transdanubia on 13 December 1951 (Péter 1952, p. 20): "The bill on the transfer of pastors is in fact nothing more than an addition to the existing administrative judicial procedure, filling in a gap. Due to the provisions of our existing law, the transfer of pastors could only take place in some form of stigmatisation. Now, without changing the entire structure of the law and the procedure prescribed therein, the supplement provides the possibility of pronouncing a transfer even if no fault is found, thus removing from the public consciousness the prejudice that a transferred pastor is always stigmatised at the same time." The result, however, was that it was no longer necessary to create unnecessary disciplinary proceedings to remove politically unreliable pastors. Those who did not identify with the new theology soon found themselves in a remote part of the country, where their livelihood and that of their families became uncertain. All this was done in the name of God and "in the public interest of the church".

30 October 1952, Debrecen. Repealed by Section 1(g) of Act II of 1964.

Its implementation and scope of responsibility are regulated by Decree No. 110/1951. (V. 19.) MT.

On 5 November 1957, Bishop Lajos Darányi and Dr. István Dienes, chief administrator, were inaugurated at a ceremonial general assembly, along with the elected diocesan officials.

János Péter was already director of the Institute for Cultural Relations at that time, and shortly afterwards he became deputy foreign minister. In 1957, Bereczky received the Order of the Flag of the Hungarian People's Republic, Second Class, 'for his steadfastness in support of popular power during the counterrevolution, for his selfless work in the peace movement for the benefit of our country and people in the construction of socialism over the past year, and for his efforts to promote good relations between the state and the church.' Tibor Bartha, László Pákozdy, Péter Hajdú, István Szamosközi, Pál Nyári, and Kálmán Huszti also received high state honours on the same occasion. József Poór assessed the events as follows: "1956 also gave rise to counter-revolutionary manifestations in the Protestant churches in Hungary, and the authors of the new ecclesiastical trend József Poór assessed the events as follows (Poór 1981, pp. 110–11): "1956 also gave rise to counter-revolutionary manifestations in the domestic Protestant churches, described by the authors of the new ecclesiastical trend as 'rebellion against the Word'. These phenomena were relatively limited in scope, with the movements led by a few church leaders from before 1948 (László Ravasz and László Papp from the Reformed Church, Lajos Ordass from the Evangelical Church, and others), whose main goal was to put the churches at the service of the political reaction. As a first step, they attempted to remove those church leaders who had worked out and implemented the cooperation between the churches and the socialist state and had also laid the foundations for the new theology (Albert Bereczky, János Péter and others)."

On 2 June 1959, the state re-established the State Office for Church Affairs by Decree No. 25 of 1959. Its implementation and tasks were regulated by Decree No. 33/1959. (VI. 2.).

Gyula Bárczay wrote a detailed study on the characteristics and evaluation of the "servant church" entitled *Megújulás-megdermedés-megmozdulás* (Renewal-Stagnation-Movement). See: Bárczay (n.d., pp. 328–63).

In accordance with the principles defined by the negotiating delegations, the legal text of the agreement was drafted by Zsolt Szikora, secretary of the city council, and the author of this paper on behalf of the diocese.

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