

The Child Protection Policy of the Reformed Church in Hungary

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ABSTRACT

This study summarises the activities of the Reformed Church in Hungary in the field of child protection, with particular reference to institutionalised child protection services. The Church's child protection policy is biblically based, allowing for personal interpretation and application of the biblical teachings. The church operates a child protection network, including family transition homes, Sure Start Children's Homes and after-school study halls. The network also includes the Hungarian Reformed Child Protection Service – Foster Parent Network, which provides foster care for children in need. The ultimate aim is to either reunite children with their birth families or to find adoptive families.

KEYWORDS

child protection, child protection activities of the Reformed Church in Hungary, best practice, biblical foundation, specificities of assistance

In this study we will present the child protection activities of the Reformed Church in Hungary in an analytical way. In Hungary today, it is the Diaconia of the Reformed Church (hereafter: 'Diaconia') that carries out the methodological ecclesiastical tasks related to the child protection institutions maintained by the Reformed Church, with the content and scope designated by the respective sectoral management. The Diaconia is an independent ecclesiastical legal entity operating within the Reformed Church in Hungary (hereafter: 'MRE'). It is important to emphasise that the Diaconia performs tasks in the field of child protection which would otherwise be the responsibility of the state under applicable legislation. It also follows that Reformed child protection policy cannot be interpreted in terms of the provision of public services per se, but that the Diaconia performs tasks delegated by the state, determined by secular legislation and other public legal regulators. At the same time, if we examine the quality of the provided services, we can see fundamental differences in content and mission, as compared to the provision of these services by the state. We will

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present the organisational units and the child protection tasks that are carried out within the MRE, primarily within the organisational framework of the Diaconia.

The role of child protection in the Reformed Church in Hungary is not a 21st century phenomenon. One could say – and perhaps it would be more correct – that the role of the Reformed Church in Hungary in the protection of children has a history of several centuries, since the care of orphans has always been the target area of the church's care for the poor. If we examine only the 20th century in more detail, we can still say that the Reformed Church has always sought to protect children. In his Easter message of 1923, László Ravasz criticised the Dunamelléki Diocese of the Reformed Church as follows:

‘At the same time, significant material resources and moral capital are lying dormant in our Church. I only point to the tasks related to the education of girls. The task of this generation of men is to secure the future by winning the souls of women. Yet, we are not the ones who imprint the souls of 99 out of every hundred girls. Does Hungarian Calvinism appreciate its enormous responsibility in this respect? The work of the mission is still progressing too slowly. How many congregations have youth associations, Bible-reading circles, church care for the poor? In the congregations of Budapest, there is still no church care for the poor, no official prison or hospital mission. There is still a shortage of prison shelters, day care centres and night shelters with the Word. Where is the organization of Reformed child protection and where is the establishment of a Reformed patronage?’¹

1. The Biblical Foundation²

In reviewing the principles of the Reformed Church for the protection of children, we have to state that, unlike other denominations, the Reformed Church in Hungary does not have a strong socio-political and theologically based position, that is, a mandate issued by the church. The foundation of the Reformed denomination's system for the protection of children is the Scripture, which provides us with direction and guidance. One of the central elements of the Reformation was the centrality of Scripture, which allowed the Bible, as God's revelation, to be accessible and understandable to all believers. The foundation of this centrality was the principle of *Sola Scriptura* – ‘Scripture alone’ – first articulated by Luther during the Reformation. This is further confirmed by 2. Timothy 3:16–17, which reads, ‘All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness,’ 2. Timothy 3:16.

1 Sárospataki Református Lapok, 1923. április 15. (XVIII. évfolyam, 15. szám), pp. 59–60.

2 The biblical verses taken from the Holy Bible, New King James Version.

During the Reformation, Scripture took centre stage as the only standard of faith and practice. Being Scripture-centred also means that each believer personally interprets and applies the teachings of the Bible in his or her life. Apostle James' general epistle confirms this:

'But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.' (James 1:22-25)

This substantive truth allows us to begin our study with a biblical foundation, to place the child and the related social issues in an anthropological context, based on scripture.

The young child is a full human being from the point of view of biblical (theological) anthropology. There is no existential difference, only a qualitative difference in development in a child compared to an adult. Not less, only different. According to testimony from the Bible, a child is a gift from God (Psalm 128:3-4). It is a special blessing to have many children, a large family. The blessing of children is a joy (Deuteronomy 28:4), a reward (Psalm 127:3), a recognition (Job 5:25), and a jewel (Prov 17:6). In the order of creation, having children is an opportunity and a duty given to parents by God. In the Old Testament, childlessness was considered shameful, a punishment from God (Genesis 30:23). The burdens of pregnancy, childbirth and child-rearing were dwarfed by the burden of the inability to procreate (1 Samuel 1:6-7), infertility and miscarriage (Exodus 23:26). The infant, regardless of its sex, was cared for by the mother in early life. This kind of care is comparable to God's care: 'Can a woman forget her nursing child, and not have compassion on the son of her womb?' (Isaiah 49:15) Mothers raised their children with care, anticipating both physical and spiritual needs (Proverbs 1:8; 6:20). Weaning occurred later than is usual today, in the second or third years of a child's life (Genesis 21:8; 1 Samuel 1:23), or possibly even later, at the age of 4-6 (1 Samuel 1:23). Thereafter, it was the mother's responsibility to raise her daughters until their marriage. Alongside a mother's care and upbringing of her sons, the father also had two main duties. In addition to the fostering of good habits and practical knowledge (Exodus 22:35) and experience (Proverbs 8:12), the aim was to educate sons for a lifetime of obedience to God (Deuteronomy 4:10; 4:23; 31:12-13; 2 Kings 27-28; Psalm 34:12). The father was primarily responsible for the upbringing of the sons, while the role of the mother remained important, but secondary. The tasks of teaching, admonishing, disciplining and consoling were shared according to the gender roles of the time (Deuteronomy 8:5; Proverbs 3:12; 13:24; Isaiah 66:13).

Anyone who shapes the lives of others is, in a general sense, participating in their education. The model of education is God himself, as he educates his people, his children. He sets an example for every person entrusted with education through his

goodness (Psalm 25:8; Romans 2:4), love (Jeremiah 31:3), discipline (Hebrews 12:6–11), comfort (Isaiah 66:13), providence (Hosea 11:1–4) and grace (Titus 2:11–12). At the heart of every educational endeavour is education by God, the aim of which is to bring us into communion with himself (John 3:40; 1 Corinthians 11:32; Revelation 3:19).

There was also a shadowy aspect to the social perception of childhood in the ancient Jewish tradition. The Book of Proverbs considers foolishness to be the opposite of wisdom, as inherent in the nature of a child (Proverbs 22:15). The child was considered ignorant and capricious, unable to comply with the Law, and therefore in need of discipline. Although Jewish culture was free of brutal practices towards children, it considered the state of life of the Law-abiding adult man as the ideal. This phenomenon is not unique to Judaism. In the Mediterranean cultures of the first century, there is both an appreciation and a devaluation of the child. Childhood was a kind of “basic training” for adulthood, before attaining the truly valuable state.

The child’s God-given dignity is defended by Jesus (Matthew 18:5; 25:40). He places obedience to the Father above filial obedience to the Law and obedience to the parent (Luke 2:27; 43:51). The child Jesus exemplified both aspects (Luke 2, 49. 51). Only when parents hinder their child’s freely experienced relationship with God (Luke 2:49) or explicitly disapprove of it (Matthew 10:35–37), can the bond break between parent and child. In the apostolic age, the Old Testament does not dissolve the provisions for the relationship between parents and their children and its quality, but supplements them. The so-called house-rules in Colossians 3:20–21 and Ephesians 6:1–4 recognise the subordinate role of children in the eyes of society, but also the example Jesus set for them of children’s weakness, vulnerability and inability to accomplish certain tasks. ‘Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.’ (Ephesians 6:1) The exhortation was addressed to all children, including the youngest. Children are called to obedience both because of their social status and because the framework of obedience is their relationship with Christ. Parents also owe obedience to Christ as wives and husbands, which partly circumscribes and partly qualitatively defines the basis of obedience. It is Christ in whom parent and child are placed side by side, all members of the family taking responsibility for one another and all being devoted to one another in obedience. Paul expands and reciprocates the meaning of the 5th commandment by exhorting fathers not to provoke their children to disobedience in their upbringing, and he is not speaking only of the obedience of children (Ephesians 6:2). A parent also owes obedience to his child. The criteria for obedience are described in Colossians in the Christian family’s house-rules as the new Christ-like man is formed. A Christian parent is obedient in his or her God-given task of child-rearing when he or she exemplifies Christ’s attitude: compassionate, kind, humble, gentle, patient, forgiving and loving.

The New Testament makes no less a demand than that the image of Christ be formed in both the educator and the ‘educated’ by the Holy Spirit: ‘My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you,’ (Galatians 4:19) ‘But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.’

(2 Corinthians 3:18) This formation is a process which takes place in a Christian family from birth. It is the mother's responsibility as much as the father's to consciously form the child, to help and support his development. Interestingly, the term "τεκνοτροφέω" – raising a child in the physical, spiritual sense – occurs only once in the New Testament (1. Timothy 5:10). Here Paul mentions the task of raising children among the virtues of widows. He commends those who have brought up children, but castigates those who have not cared for the people of their house as deniers of the faith, whom he considers to be worse than the nonbelievers.

Many documents from the ancient East, dating from the same time as the Old Testament, show that respect for parents was valued and protected throughout the world. However, contrary to the teachings of Jesus, these writings do not mention respect for children. To respect a small child, he says, is to give him the care, attention and patience he deserves, as one who is both at the mercy of his parents and entrusted to them.

2. Brief Reviews of the Current Hungarian Child Protection System

In 1989, the New York Convention formally outlined what became internationally recognised as children's rights, establishing a new framework for protecting the well-being of minors. Hungary adopted these principles in 1991 through the enactment of Act LXIV, which integrated the convention's ideas into its legal system.

In 1997, Hungary took another significant leap forward in child protection by passing Act XXXI, which focused on both the protection of children and the responsibilities of guardians. This law marked a turning point in the country's approach to child welfare, establishing a more efficient and structured system to safeguard children's rights. It was a crucial development in ensuring that all indigent or disadvantaged children would receive equal protection and support. The act introduced a hierarchical framework that adhered not only to Hungarian legal principles but also to international standards, demonstrating the country's commitment to upholding global values in child protection.

The modern child protection system in Hungary, guided by this legislation, is built around three main pillars: supporting the upbringing of children within their families and fostering their physical, emotional, and intellectual development; preventing and addressing situations that endanger or harm children; and providing substitute care, such as foster homes or institutions, when necessary. The aim of this system is to ensure that every child, regardless of their circumstances, has access to the necessary resources and protections to thrive. Through this approach, Hungary has sought to create a robust and comprehensive child welfare system that prioritises the well-being of its youngest citizens.

The Child Protection Act (Act XXXI of 1997) has undergone several revisions over the years. A significant amendment, effective from January 1 2014, introduced a rule prohibiting the placement of children under the age of 12 in children's homes. Instead,

such children were to be placed with foster families, except in cases where the child was chronically ill, had a disability, or belonged to a larger sibling group that needed to stay together. At the same time, the role of guardianship for children without parental care was redefined. A child protection guardian was assigned to replace the head of the child protection facility. This change aimed to better safeguard the child's rights and avoid potential conflicts of interest that could arise when the facility head also served as the child's guardian. Further changes were made starting on January 1 2017, refining the conditions under which foster care could be bypassed. The updated rule stated that foster care should only be avoided if placing a chronically ill or severely disabled child in a foster family would not be in the child's best interest, due to their health needs, or if it was not feasible. Similarly, foster care could be bypassed if it was impossible to keep siblings together in foster families.

The Child Protection Act has been amended several times in recent years, but the basic aims have not changed: the most important task of the government's social policy remains the protection of the child's physical, mental and emotional health and the promotion of his or her upbringing in the family. To help achieve these goals, the role of church-based childcare providers has become increasingly important since 2012. As a result of the involvement of the churches, we are seeing a gradual transfer of childcare institutions to churches. For this reason, it is an important question – and thus also the aim of this study – to examine what kind of child protection system is maintained by the Reformed Church in Hungary.

3. The Institutional System of the Diaconia of the Reformed Church in the Context of Child Protection

The main activity of the Diaconia is the exercise of full charter rights, maintenance, and administrative and management tasks with respect to social and child welfare and child protection institutions – those either established by the Reformed Church in Hungary or by the Diaconia itself, as authorised by the Church. The scope of the tasks to be performed and other activities are determined by the secular law in force and the internal legal regulations of the Reformed Church in Hungary and the Diaconia.³ It carries out its tasks in accordance with Article 16 of Act II of 2000 on the Charity Service of the Hungarian Reformed Church. Professional aid activities are structured through the institutions and services it maintains. It is an independent and fully competent charter organisation of the public church charity service institutions and services founded by the Diaconia on the basis of the Synod or the Synod's authorisation – i.e., it is responsible for the operation, management and supervision of these institutions.

3 Organisational and Operational Regulations of the Diaconia of the Reformed Church. Current legislation: 1. January 2022, para. 7.

The Diaconia carries out methodological activities related to social, child protection and integration.⁴ The Director General of the Diaconia liaises with, among others, state and government bodies in the social and guardianship administration.⁵ The Deputy Director General directly controls the monitoring activities that examine the legality, economy, efficiency and effectiveness of the operation of social, child welfare, child protection or integration services maintained by parishes or dioceses.⁶ The aim of the Diaconal Office within the framework of the Diaconia is to promote and support the professional operation of the deaconry institutions maintained by the Diaconia, and to initiate improvements in order to provide quality services.⁷ Within this framework, the Diaconal Office performs the social and child protection methodological tasks defined by special legislation.⁸ The aim of the Department for Social Inclusion of the Diaconia is to organise and provide development, compensation and social services to the most disadvantaged in accordance with the missionary goals of the Hungarian Reformed Church. In particular, it is responsible for coordinating, assisting and monitoring the professional work of the Sure Start Children's Houses and after-school study halls established within the framework of social inclusion measures and tenders, as well as the Reformed Roma college(s), and for implementing the programmes and tasks of the Hungarian Reformed Church in the area of empowerment.⁹

In addition to maintaining the institutions, the Diaconia performs professional development, methodological and monitoring tasks; provides professional assistance in the operation of Reformed services and institutions; assists in the development of and presents good working models for congregational deaconry; organises training courses and conferences; and develops concepts and development proposals. In addition, the Diaconia liaises with charitable organisations of other churches, social professional organisations, municipalities and the government. In recent years, the provision of professional services has largely been determined by organisational changes, the war emergency, the resulting economic crisis and the continuous and intense workload caused by the capacity transfers from the state.

From 2022, the scope of the Diaconia has been significantly expanded. From 1 January the Diaconia has been responsible for the maintenance of the two Reformed Roma colleges (Wáli István Reformed Roma College (WISZ), and the Budapest Reformed Roma College (REFOROM)), assuming the tasks related to the employment of social missionary pastors from the defunct Reformed Mission Centre, and

4 Organisational and Operational Regulations of the Diaconia of the Reformed Church. Current legislation: 01. 01. 2022, para. 1.3.

5 Ibid., para. 2.1.1. b).

6 Ibid., para. 2.2.1. l).

7 Ibid., para. 1.1.

8 Ibid., para. 1.2.

9 Ibid., para. 2.

the tasks of the National Roma Mission and the related HEKS¹⁰ project from the MRE Synod Office.

As a result of the reorganisation of internal church tasks adopted by the Synod of the MRE, a new organisational unit was established within the Diaconia: the activities of the National Reformed Roma Mission were reorganised under the Social Inclusion department, including the tasks related to the exercise of the charter rights of WISZ and REFOROM, as well as the tasks related to the after-school study halls and Sure Start Children's Homes.

3.1. Cooperation of the Diaconia With Other MRE Institutions

The Diaconia carries out its basic activities in close cooperation with the Hungarian Reformed Charity Service Foundation (hereafter: 'MRSZA'), with the resulting synergies making the provision of tasks more efficient both professionally and economically. MRSZA is an NGO which primarily provides humanitarian assistance. Among the various areas of service, such as social services, child protection and social inclusion, and the social missions coordinated by MRSZA, the charitable service and the implementers of the various social development programmes cooperate at a strategic and operational implementation level. The duplication between the service areas has been eliminated, leading to more efficient use of financial and human resources. Every Monday, the staff participate in a joint devotional service, and there is also a free flow of information concerning each ministry area in the forums supporting the management. Professional development activities, previously confined to social sector issues, have been opened up to include mission service issues. Public relations activities also have a unified image, with both the Diaconia and the MRSZA adopting the same elements in their image presentation and both organisations paying particular attention to coordinated communication.

3.2. External Collaborations of the Diaconia

The Diaconia proactively seeks to involve the ministries of the congregations in all its activities. A strong relationship has been developed with the Mission Service in the areas of the Roma mission, institutional ministry and social missions. There is ongoing cooperation with the Education Service in the field of territorial catch-up programmes, programmes which compensate for disadvantages and the school inclusion programme. An important development is that Károli Gáspár Reformed University considers the Diaconia to be its partner, and close cooperation has been established in the development of the content of social training courses and in consideration of the creation of professional diaconry training for the church's institutional system.

10 HEKS/EPER supports development cooperation projects in more than 30 countries (including Hungary) on four continents to fight poverty and injustice and advocates a dignified life for all people. At the same time, HEKS/EPER strives for systemic change with its development work – in Switzerland and worldwide. For this reason, HEKS provides support for the catch-up programs of the Reformed Church in Hungary, with particular regard to child protection.

3.3. Professional Development in the Diaconia

The Diaconia is a designated ecclesiastical social methodological institution, a methodological institution for ecclesiastical foster care, child and residential care, and a methodological institution for ecclesiastical schools. Within the framework of the social methodological activity, thematic online workshops are held (elderly, disability, addict-psychiatric-patient-homeless profile, normative and documentation). Within the framework of the child protection methodological activity, similar knowledge-building and consultative workshops, case discussions and consultations are held for both foster care and child residential care. In the area of inclusion, there are monthly workshops for the Sure Start Children's Homes, the after-school study halls, and the Roma-specialised colleges. All stakeholders who have or may have a link to the field are invited to the workshops, the total number of which is around 50 per year. Major thematic conferences are organised annually in the fields of social care, child protection services, inclusion and mission, attended by hundreds of participants. The Diaconia regularly publishes newsletters in all of these fields.

3.4. Basic Child Welfare Services Provided by the Diaconia

In terms of basic child welfare services, the transitional home for families and children's services to improve opportunities are being implemented. The Lorántffy Zsuzsanna Reformed Maternity Home for Families is a transitional home for families. The institution is managed by the head of the institution, who runs the Miskolc Maternity Home (headquarters) and the nearby Reformed Transitional Mothers' Home in Vissi. The latter is operated by the Diaconia and is not a separate legal entity. In the Miskolc Settlement, there are 6 social workers, while in the Vissi Settlement there is 1 professional manager/social worker and 4 additional social workers. The institution welcomes homeless mothers and their children from all over the country. The aim of the institution is to provide the temporarily homeless with provisional lodging and assistance with living arrangements.¹¹ The aim of the placement is to enable residents to leave the institution and to be able to lead independent lives. The level of care varies from individual to individual. The institution provides accommodation for both the mother and her child(ren) in a home-like setting.¹²

Services to improve children's opportunities include the Sure Start Children's Houses and the after-school study halls. Sure Start Children's Houses are run by the Diaconia in six locations: Mohács, Sellye, Mezőcsokonya, Bodvaszilás, Bodvaellenke and Bánréve. The Sure Start programme was born to counter social and economic inequality, which is growing and is highly concentrated in Hungary. Its mission is to intervene effectively to prevent the re-emergence of poverty and exclusion and to help build a more inclusive society. More Sure Start Children's Houses are currently being set up and their network developed in line with the principles of the programme.¹³

11 Lorántffy, 2022, p. 4.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

The aim of the Children's House Services is to provide a preventive service to children with socio-cultural disadvantages, primarily children receiving regular child protection benefits, to ensure their healthy development, to compensate for their developmental delays, to strengthen parental competence and to provide a social inclusion service for parents and children not yet attending kindergarten. It supports the cultivation of community cultural traditions and values, the cultural activities of the communities, and the pursuit of cultural objectives aimed at improving the lifestyle of the population.

The Children's House Service operates under the direction and guidance of the Diaconia, which is its charter organisation. The Director General of the Diaconia exercises his professional supervisory authority over the Children's House Service through the head of the department for inclusion.

The Children's House Service is obliged, in accordance with the legal provisions in force at any given time, to provide services to families with socio-cultural disadvantages, to encourage them to use these services, and to provide them with regular professional services such as health assessment, competency-building activities and development, as well as meals. It is also required to organise programmes which encourage parents to participate in activities with their children, to provide parents with personal and competence development, to teach them the skills they need to bring up their children, to ensure personal hygiene and to manage their household, and to provide other preventive assistance. Furthermore, the Children's House Service is required to organise at least twelve community events a year for families with children under the age of three and for the local community, of which at least six must be tailored to the needs of the families using the services of the Children's House.

The Children's House Service may provide parents with medical, dietetic and other health advisory services, organise parent group discussions with the involvement of a specialist, and provide consultation with representatives of providers of care and services for children with disabilities or with different developmental needs, as well as with the parents of these children whose condition is certified by a doctor or a nurse providing primary health care. The House Service may assist parents in obtaining feedback on communication with their child and on their parenting methods, organise weekly play sessions for children and their parents, and ensure access to appropriate professionals for children with special needs living in the surrounding villages and settlements. The Service also recommends access to health care, other health services, social and child welfare services, help with family planning and prevention of unsafe pregnancies, and assistance to expectant mothers in preparing for the birth of their child, as well as providing washing, drying and cleaning facilities.

In terms of services for children's empowerment, the Diaconia operates after-school study halls. These are the Sunrise School in Biharkeresztes, the Wise Solomon School, the Eben School, the Dawn Star School, the Beaver School, the Kisszekeresi School, the Komád School, the Okányi School, the Piliscsaba School, the Goat's Nest School in Pilisvörösvár, the Sellyei School, the Szatmárcseke School and the Mustard Seed School in Szendrő. The activities of these schools are also governed and operate

in accordance with legislation. The service of the after-school study hall is to provide voluntary social inclusion, primarily for children and sometimes for young adults who receive regular child protection benefits, or who are disadvantaged or severely disadvantaged.

4. Institutional Child Protection Services of the Reformed Church in Hungary

Recognising the shortcomings of the state child protection system, the Reformed Church in Hungary developed a child protection concept in 2006. The concept was to establish integrated child welfare and child protection institutions, with the churches assuming the entire scope of the child protection system. In the summer of 2008, pastors and church members began to recruit foster parents in the churches of Gégény, Szabolcsveresmarton, Beszterec, Dombrád, Kécske and Tiszakanyar.

The Hungarian Reformed Church's Office of Relief Services (known as the Diaconia from 2022) supported the concept, and on 20 November 2008 the MRE Synod unanimously voted to establish the Hungarian Reformed Child Protection Service – Foster Parent Network. All the necessary moral and financial support and conditions for the launch, operation and development of the service were thereby made available.¹⁴ The establishment of the service was unique in the country, as there was no other specialised nationwide child protection service operated by a historical church. To explain why foster care was preferred to residential care, the belief is that healing the wounds of children who have been deprived of their families and have suffered multiple traumas is only possible in a loving, accepting family environment.¹⁵

The most considerable advantages of this institution are its small size and congregational foundation. One could say that it was built from the ground up and was created by the need that appeared in the congregation of the Reformed Church in Hungary. Within the framework of the Diaconia, there are now two large centres for specialised care for Reformed children, which carry out tasks related to child protection – one each in eastern and western Hungary.

The Hungarian Reformed Child Protection Service – Foster Parent Network was officially founded on 21 November 2008 by the Reformed Church in Hungary, in conjunction with the missionary activity of the church. It is a partially autonomous church institution operated by the Hungarian Reformed Church's Office for Relief Services¹⁶ and is not an independent legal entity. From 1 January 2021, the name of the institution was changed to Kelet-magyarországi Református Gyermekevédelmi Központ (East-Hungarian Reformed Child Protection Centre), under the auspices of

¹⁴ Váradi, 2010, p. 120.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Organisational and Operational Regulations of the East-Hungarian Reformed Child Protection Centre, 2022, p. 5.

the Diaconia. The institution was established to enrich the child protection system, to provide high quality services and thus to contribute to improving the quality of care. The ultimate aim is to reunite the child with his/her birth family or, if this is not possible, with an adoptive family. The socialisation and re-socialisation of the child during the period of care and upbringing is carried out in line with Reformed Christian values and using the methods of Christian religious and moral education.¹⁷ The function of the Reformed Child Protection Centres is to perform the tasks of the Foster Parents Network and to operate the Children's Home.¹⁸ The Reformed Child Protection Centres may be presented through the Foster Parent Network on the one hand, and through the Children's Home functions on the other.

4.1. The Professional Added Value of the Child Protection Network of the Reformed Church in Hungary

One of the major strengths of the Reformed child protection network is its embeddedness in its congregations, engendering close community support. This link helps society to recognise children in difficulty and the supportive institutions as integral parts of the local community. The broad support of the local church contributes to the stability of the network.

The service environment places great emphasis on personalised development, with particular attention to children with special needs. Emphasis is also placed on talent management, making up deficits and ensuring that leisure time is spent in a useful way. The organisation works to relieve the burden on foster parents by organising family camps and outings, providing professional assistance and donations. The network runs its own self-help groups, which further strengthen the community. Appropriate religious education is provided, as requested by the foster parents. The organisation is also committed to strengthening minority identity. Voluntary diaconry services include recreational activities, talent development, outreach and fundraising.¹⁹

The active participation of pastors in the implementation of the professional programme has a significant impact on its content. This is particularly true for individual and group work, as well as for community events. By integrating Christian values and Reformed catechetical knowledge into the programme, pastors contribute to the overall development of the system. Their presence also has a positive impact on the children and young adults in child and young adult protective care, providing opportunities for spiritual support, increasing self-confidence and fostering emotional and intellectual growth. Employees also benefit from the presence of pastors, as they provide spiritual support and guidance, which increases job satisfaction and effectiveness. The inclusive and welcoming workplace culture developed by pastors respects employees of different faiths and beliefs; however, attitude formation continues to be

17 Ibid., p. 5.

18 Organisational and Operational Regulations of the West-Hungarian Reformed Child Protection Centre, 2022, p. 8.

19 Váradi, 2013, p. 120.

a great challenge. Social missions run by the Reformed Church in Hungary, such as the Roma mission, bring added value to the community. These programmes support marginalised groups and promote social integration and inclusion.

The benefits, both in absolute and relative terms, of maintaining the Diaconia are the significant contributions to the effectiveness of social care and inclusion services, particularly in comparison with state-run child protection services. The combined knowledge and resources of the programmes maintained by the Diaconia and operated by the MRSZA lead to more effective solutions. For example, donor coordination can be used to complement physical care, or service elements provided by different missions, and can be integrated into professional work (e.g., the Roma mission's career guidance programme has been extended to children in care).

5. Good Practices in the Child Protection System of the Reformed Church

5.1. Bibles for Children in Residential Homes

The aim of the project in 2023 was to give every child living in a residential home their own bible, which they can read and through which they can grow closer to the loving God, thereby strengthening their self-assessment, self-esteem and relationships. We are convinced that, by studying God's Word with a prayerful heart, the Christian man interprets and seeks God's guidance; it is important to learn how to do this and to make it a daily habit. Daily bible reading is like a meal for the Christian man, without which he withers away, but through which he gains new life and strength. Children need to be shown and taught how to read and interpret Scripture, so that reading becomes an experience. Group bible studies strengthen this aspect. The guiding principle of the initiative implemented by the Children's Protection Centre of the Reformed Church in West Hungary was: 'All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for [c]instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.' (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

The plan outlined above is designed to involve supporters and donors in the purchase of bibles. The strategy was to organise fundraising events during church visits or institutional occasions, where "bible tickets" were sold, with the proceeds going towards the purchase of bibles. These occasions were excellent opportunities to showcase the services of the institution and to raise awareness of the ministry for children, indirectly gaining more publicity and support for their activities. This approach not only facilitated the allocation of resources for the purchase of bibles but also created a closer link between the institution and the supportive environment, thus strengthening the common goal of ministry for children.

Each child is given a bible appropriate for his or her age group. The distribution of the bibles is part of a celebration in each home. A regularly occurring series of age-specific bible studies follows. Since active involvement with the congregation is also important, the local pastors and religion teachers also participate in bible studies.

5.2. Talent management

Many of the foster parents in the Reformed network place great emphasis on the development of gifted children, where a marked interest in sport, learning or art is noted. In cases where children are highly skilled in a particular sport, the cost of transport to competitions, equipment and nutritious meals will increase. Where young people are studying music, the financial burden on the foster parent is increased by the maintenance or the purchase of an instrument. Not all talented children can be nurtured in a school setting, so transport and extra lessons are again an extra cost. To help cover these costs, the Diaconia provides quarterly financial and, occasionally, material support. Some foster parents are unable to provide for the development of their children in a school setting. The school cannot provide the development teacher or specialist locally, so the development has to be carried out in either another institution or another municipality, which places an increased burden on the foster parent in terms of both time and transport costs. Financial support is also provided to cover this cost.

The vast majority of foster parents live in a family home with a garden. Toys and equipment appropriate for younger children are provided and installed everywhere. In our experience, there is an increasing number of trampolines, which can be an important tool for children's development. In the foster carers' advisory service, professionals pay great attention to ensuring that children spend an appropriate period of time outdoors, according to the season, the weather and their age. To help and support this aspect, the Diaconia provides developmental and sports equipment (bicycles, scooters, gymnastics balls, trampolines, sledges, running bikes, small plastic motorbikes, skipping ropes, etc.).

The network's priority is to promote learning and develop talent. However, in order for this work to have a real impact on everyday life, it is necessary to compensate for the limited financial resources of foster families by providing equipment. The active involvement and development of foster parents is also necessary in order to ensure the appropriate and targeted use of resources. One of the network's main goals is to help our children catch up in their studies and to nurture their talents. Helping children and young people to develop their potential – indirectly preventing early school leaving – promotes healthy lifestyles for children. Within this, talent assessment, talent development and care are given priority. These activities cannot be carried out effectively without establishing and maintaining effective working relationships and partnerships. The Reformed child protection system strives to develop excellent partnerships with all professionals, institutions and municipalities involved in the development of the child and his or her family.

Children in care receive psychological assessments and development assistance in nearby facilities. Determining the psychological status of the children in care and assessing their abilities and skills are primarily the tasks of external psychologists. The Diaconia supports this work with group self-awareness activities. Gifted children without psychological or emotional problems are relatively simple to care for professionally, as they can manage independently in many respects. Talent management

for gifted children with problems, on the other hand, requires additional group work. Low academic achievement, anxious or inhibited, or mentally disabled children may be problematic. Their development is hindered not by a lack of abilities, but by difficulties in their personality development, e.g., increased anxiety, mood swings, emotional disturbance, vegetative psychic symptoms, insufficient development of motivation, will, etc. These children are included in the personality development group (30 hours). The mentors are university students who carry out their work on a voluntary basis. The mentored children and students work on the basis of a development plan in the form of distance learning on the Internet, based on the individualised material sent to them by the mentors.

Talent management competence development is closely linked to the work of the Specialised Services for Children and Young People in the Directorate-General for Social Affairs and Child Protection.

5.3. Mental Health Support Through Pastoral Care

A distinctive feature of the Reformed child protection system is that mental health and pastoral care support provided by pastors can be an alternative to psychiatric care for those suffering from mental health problems or trauma. Their presence is perhaps one of the least visible, yet essential parts of this work. Children are visited in their own environment, giving them the opportunity to approach the pastor with their problems and to feel that they are important. Experiential community-strengthening gatherings provide an opportunity for reaching out and listening, where authentic and Christ-centred spirituality can be expressed in the context of summer camps, meetings and family days, for children and professional staff alike.

It is critical to build good relationships with local pastors and to sensitise them to child protection. Good communication and the availability of “basic services” can lead to joint success for the child, the professional network and the local community.

6. Summary

The Reformed Church in Hungary has a long history of protecting children, with the care of orphans being a target area of the church’s diaconal work for several centuries. Today, the Diaconia of the Reformed Church carries out the ecclesiastical methodological tasks related to child protection institutions maintained by the church, with the content and scope designated by the respective sectoral management. The Diaconia performs tasks in the field of child protection that would otherwise be the responsibility of the state under applicable legislation. The Reformed Church’s programme for the protection of children is based on scripture, which provides direction and guidance. The young child is considered a full human being from the point of view of biblical anthropology, and the child’s God-given dignity is defended by Jesus. The Diaconia of the Reformed Church in Hungary is responsible for the maintenance, administrative and management tasks of social and child welfare institutions. It

carries out its tasks in accordance with the secular law in force and the internal legal regulations of the Reformed Church in Hungary and the Diaconia – and it liaises with state and government bodies in the social and guardianship administration. It is responsible for the maintenance of the two Reformed Roma colleges, assuming the tasks related to the employment of social missionary pastors from the defunct Reformed Mission Centre, and the tasks of the National Roma Mission and the related HEKS project from the MRE Synod Office.

The Reformed Church in Hungary's Diaconia program provides social care and inclusion services for children and young adults in protective care. Led by pastors who integrate Christian values and Reformed catechetical knowledge into the program, the Diaconia provides basic child welfare services, including a transitional home for families and children's services. The Lorántffy Zsuzsanna Reformed Maternity Home for Families offers provisional lodging and assistance with living arrangements for homeless mothers and their children. The Sure Start Children's Houses provide a preventive service to young children with socio-cultural disadvantages, compensating for developmental delays and strengthening parental competence. The program also supports marginalised groups and promotes social integration and inclusion through initiatives such as the Roma mission. The Hungarian Reformed Child Protection Service – Foster Parent Network was officially founded in 2008, providing high-quality services to contribute to improving the quality of care. The program provides financial and material support for the development of gifted children, including transport to competitions and extra lessons. The program also provides developmental and sports equipment to foster families and promotes talent assessment, development, and care. Overall, the Diaconia program aims to provide spiritual support and guidance to both employees and those in care, while also promoting social integration and inclusion for disadvantaged children and young adults.

The Reformed child protection system offers mental health and pastoral care support as an alternative to psychiatric care for children suffering from mental health problems or trauma. Pastors visit children in their own environment, providing them with a safe space to approach with their problems. Experiential community-strengthening gatherings, such as summer camps and family days, offer opportunities for authentic and Christ-centred spirituality. Building good relationships with local pastors and sensitising them to child protection is critical to joint success for the child, the professional network, and the local community.

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