

## **St. John's Partnership with the Unitarian Church of Nyaradszentlaszlo/Sinvasii, Romania**

In 1990, Rev. Diana Heath initiated St. John's involvement in a partnership with the Unitarian Church of Nyaradszentlaszlo, Romania. In the first few years it was difficult to get letters to and from our partner. Then in 1994, Mary and Tom Darner went to visit this rural Transylvania congregation. Thus began a transformational partnership for those involved. We have gained lasting friendships. We have worked at walking in others' shoes, expanding our minds and faith through exposure to Unitarians of a different history and of the Hungarian language and culture. We've been the recipients of beautiful handmade crafts, exquisite wood carvings, a sculpture by Gyarmathy Janos (who grew up in the village), and incredible hospitality. We have learned about our historical roots in Transylvania Unitarianism dating back to 1568.

Unitarianism in that region is the longest continuing form of Unitarianism in the world! We've come to appreciate what courage it has taken to keep their faith alive in spite of wars and long-standing oppression. Experience has taught them that Unitarianism is a faith that cannot be taken for granted; it must be fought for and kept alive. Unitarians, there, are born into their faith; it is a life-long association that goes back generations with rich history and traditions.

We have celebrated our partnership with 22 years of Partner Church Dinners, eating Hungarian foods. In 1997-8 St. John's raised funds for a small community building for the Szentlaszlo congregation and concurrently made a quilt for them. Szentlaszlo volunteers constructed the building and it was dedicated when St. Johners visited there in 1998. In 2000 Rev. Mihaly Kiss, his wife, Rozsa, and daughter, Csilla, came to visit St. John's. Mihaly and Rozsa visited again in 2009, participating in our partner church dinner and again in 2016 to celebrate Rev. Kiss's completion of 40 years of ministry to the Szentlaszlo Unitarian Church. Rev. Kiss's youngest daughter, Marta, and her husband, Istvan, who live in California were celebrated at a partner church dinner following their wedding.

St. John's choir traveled to Transylvania, Hungary and the Czech Republic in 2001 to sing in Unitarian churches. In May 2014 forty-eight St. Johners including Rev. Mitra Jafarzadeh made a pilgrimage to Szentlaszlo. On that trip our church choir sang in Unitarian churches in Budapest and Transylvania. Additional trips by congregants to Transylvania include a harvest trip in 2004, Rev. Carpenter and others visiting there in 2005, a trip with Rev. Denise Tracy, Interim Minister in 2011, and a craft learning trip in 2012. More recently, our church historian, Debbie Combs, and her husband visited Szentlaszlo. John Kachuba and Mary Newman visited, planted a cherry tree, and made cherry soup for the congregation. Rev. Jafarzadeh and family made additional visits and Edie Holder also visited. All trips have included visits to historic Unitarian sites. We've come home with many handicrafts to sell to congregants, raising money for our partners. Through the years we have hosted several Transylvania ministers and their family members in our homes and at St. Johns. In 2017 we hosted Vera Kelemen from the congregation and assisted her attendance at the International Convocation of Unitarian Women. Vera has, since then, created a vibrant weaving house in the village and also serves as church treasurer.

Over the years St. John's has sent funds, at the congregation's request, to help with social activities and trips, to help maintain their church buildings and to add to the minister's salary. We've supported medical needs and provided school materials. We've also funded scholarships to send children to Unitarian summer camps and we've supported confirmation student trips to significant Unitarian historical sites. In 2005, at Rev. Kiss' request, we began serving Sunday soup and bread lunches at St. John's to raise funds for a weekly loaf of bread for each elderly Unitarian in the village. That effort was ended in December 2022 when the current partner minister, Rev. Szilagyi Szilamer, determined it was no longer essential because the most needy elderly were now deceased.

In June 2023, Rev. Szilagyi requested our financial help with renovation of what had been a Unitarian elementary school, then became a public school run by the Communist government, and was later returned to the Unitarians. In recent years a new school was built for elementary students and the Unitarian building deteriorated due to lack of funds. St. Johns sent funds for materials for repairs and volunteers did many of the renovations in a work camp at the end of June. Bringing a water line to the school is anticipated with remaining funds. The historic Unitarian church, originally a Catholic church for which papal records date back to 1332, often receives visitors due to its significance. Rev. Szilagyi and the congregation see the school building as a welcome center for visitors, a museum, a place for community gatherings, and home for the weaving house. This project is infusing energy to renew our partnership connections which have been uneven through the COVID years and the many changes in partner ministers.

After Rev. Kiss's retirement in 2015, the Rev. Leta, Zsolt and family, lived in the village, serving the congregation briefly. After that, Rev. Jakabhazi Bela-Botond, who lives in an adjoining village, served the congregation and helped us stay connected through monthly video calls. Our most recent partner minister, Rev. Szilagyi Szilamer, lives in Nyomat, 2 kilometers away. All of our partner ministers have had responsibility for serving three small congregations, in Nyomat, Nyaradszentlaszlo, and Suketdemeterfalva.

The Friends of Szentlaszlo and the broader St. John's community have worked tirelessly to keep St. John's role in this partnership vibrant. We finalized a Covenant of Partnership between the congregations in 2006. Our soup lunches continue and funds raised will help with our continuing connections with Szentlaszlo, whether that be for travel scholarships for face-to-face visits, or for whatever becomes a priority. With the retirement of Mary and Tom Darner as leaders of St. Johns partnership team, it is time for new leadership at St. Johns along with much discussion within and among our two congregations to shape the future of our partnership. Emily Hodges, Charles Spencer, and Mary Lynne Schuster have stepped forward to provide leadership for the partner church program at St. Johns along with the Partner Church Team.

Revised by Mary Darner September 26, 2023