

14 April 2014

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

I write this letter per the request of Assembly of God United Pentecostal Church (Isten Gyülekezete Egyesült Pünkösdi Egyház) (hereinafter IGY) to express my professional opinion on the question of whether IGY satisfies the conditions for recognition as an incorporated church set forth in Act CCVI of 2011.

1. My professional credentials are as follows.

Currently I hold a position as Associate Professor of Theology and Philosophy at Texas Lutheran University, USA. I received a Ph.D. in Theology from the University of Notre Dame, USA in 1999 with subsidiary concentrations in the sociology of religion and the history of theology. I received an MA in Theology from the University of Notre Dame, USA in 1995; a Masters of Theological Studies from Emory University, USA in 1992; and a BA from Oberlin College, USA in 1990.

In 1996-97, I received a Fulbright Fellowship to conduct research in Hungary. In 2007 I received a Fulbright Fellowship to teach at Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church. Between 2003 and 2009 I served on the editorial board of the journal *Religion in Eastern Europe*. Currently I serve on the executive board of *Forum Religionsfreiheit Europa*. I have been publishing scholarly articles on topics related to religion in Hungary, in both English and Hungarian, since 1998. In 2006 I published a monograph, *The Struggle of Hungarian Lutherans under Communism* (Texas A&M University Press). In 2013 I received an Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Grant to support my research on religious communities in Hungary. As part of that research I have engaged in field studies of IGY. This field work has included observing worship services, interviewing church members, familiarizing myself with IGY's history and bylaws, and establishing direct communication with IGY's affiliate in the United States, United Pentecostal Church International (hereinafter UPCI).

2. As a professional scholar of religion with an extensive research background in Hungary, I disagree with the opinion of the expert appointed by the Minister of Human Resources to evaluate the application for registration as an incorporated church submitted by IGY.

Specifically, I would like to express my disagreement with the expert's opinion concerning IGY in relation to the conditions for recognition set forth in Act CCVI of 2011 14/A § (1) points a) through c). I believe that had the expert referred in his opinion to all of the documents enclosed with IGY's application for registration, had he interviewed members of IGY and UPCI as I have done, and had he adhered to accepted methodological standards for sociological research, he would have been unable to arrive at the conclusion he did.

2.1. In my professional judgment, IGY is indisputably a member church of UPCI.

The expert appointed by the Minister of Human Resources disputes this. S/he acknowledges IGY has a history of close collaboration with UPCI; s/he acknowledges that UPCI and IGY have jointly purchased worship houses in Hungary; s/he acknowledges that IGY's bylaws explicitly refer to an active connection with UPCI; and s/he acknowledges that UPCI posted photos on Facebook of the funeral of IGY President Sándor Horváth. The expert nevertheless concludes that this close relationship amounts only to "cooperation," and does not meet the standard needed to qualify as a member church.

Unfortunately, the methodology employed by the unnamed government expert to arrive at this evaluation is fundamentally flawed. The expert's methodology is in contradiction of OSCE/ODIHR Guidelines for Review of Legislation Pertaining to Religion or Belief (adopted by the Venice Commission at its 59th Plenary Session, (Venice, 18-19 June 2004)). According to those guidelines, the state has "a duty to remain neutral and impartial." Among other things, this "excludes assessment by the State of the legitimacy of religious beliefs or the ways in which those beliefs are expressed." Furthermore, "In general, the neutrality requirement means that registration requirements that call for substantive as opposed to formal review of the statue or character of a religious organization are impermissible." (OSCE/ODHR Guidelines, page 11). The state's obligation to adopt an impartial and neutral stance toward different religions was emphasized by the Venice Commission in its Opinion on Act CCVI of 2011 (adopted 16/17 March 2012), pars. 38, 61, 72, and again in its Report on the Fourth Amendment to the Fundamental Law of Hungary (adopted 14-15 June 2013), par. 34. The importance of state neutrality was also reiterated by the European Court of Human Rights in its decision, *MAGYAR KERESZTÉNY MENNONITA EGYHÁZ AND OTHERS v. HUNGARY*, par. 76. Further, the preamble to Act CCVI of 2011 affirms the principle of state neutrality toward worldviews.

In keeping with the requirement of state neutrality, the task of the government expert was not to evaluate the *quality* of the relationship between IGY and UPCI, but to ascertain the nature of that relationship *according to the religious self-understanding of the two churches*. To assess that self-understanding the expert had at his disposal two signed and notarized statements from the General Superintendent of UPCI in Hazelwood, MO, USA stating explicitly that IGY was a member church of UPCI. Had the expert chosen to interview the leadership of IGY or communicate with the leadership of UPCI in the United States, he could have easily verified this. However, the expert, while acknowledging that these two churches have a long history of collaboration, asserts that this does qualify them as member churches. In asserting this, the expert rejects the religious self-definition of IGY and UPCI, and applies his/her own substantive evaluation of the relationship between the two churches.

The expert does not explain the scientific methodology s/he uses to substitute UPCI's self-definition with the expert's private definition. Indeed, the expert does not even offer a definition of "member church." Instead, the expert employs an unspecified and value-laded substantive conception of "member church" to dismiss the self-definition of the religious communities in question. This kind of biased substantive evaluation cannot be reconciled with the principle of scientific objectivity. Nor can it be reconciled with the principle of state neutrality toward religious worldviews. For these reasons, the opinion of the government appointed expert must be rejected.

Defining the nature of the church is essentially a theological question. Within the Christian tradition, a tradition to which IGY and UPCI belong, the church is usually defined by a branch of theology known as ecclesiology. Different Christian churches have different ecclesiological teachings. For example, the Roman Catholic Church has what is sometimes called a mono-episcopal ecclesiology. According to this teaching, the bishops stand in visible and historic succession with Christ's apostles at the head of local churches, which are in communion with each other and with the bishop of Rome to form the church catholic. By contrast, Lutheran ecclesiology rejects idea of visible historic succession. Lutheran ecclesiology holds that the church is constituted solely by the Word of God and made visible in local congregations, whose unity is discernable by virtue of true teaching of the gospel and proper administration of the sacraments. These different ecclesiological teachings mean that the criteria for defining "member church" within these two religious communities are different. Lutheran churches which belong to the Lutheran World Federation believe they exist in "full communion" with each other, even though they do not share episcopal succession and even though their forms of polity are quite different. The Roman Catholic Church does not accept this definition of full communion. According to Roman Catholic self-understanding, the unity of the church requires episcopal succession and excludes certain forms of polity. Therefore, to assess whether two Lutheran churches are member churches one must employ different criteria than those employed when assessing whether two Roman Catholic churches share a common membership.

According to its webpage, UPCI has a congregational and presbyterian ecclesiological structure. This ecclesiological self-understanding was both confirmed and explained to me by David K. Bernard, General Superintendent of UPCI in personal correspondence. As Mr. Bernard explained it to me, local churches are organized according to a congregational structure, with local assemblies and an elected pastor. Those local congregations are joined at a national level according to a modified presbyterian principle, which means that ministerial delegates from local congregations meet to vote on decisions and policies. The national churches, in turn, are members of the Global Council of UPCI, of which IGY is a member. All member churches of UPCI accept the "International Articles of Faith" and follow the "Global Council Policies." According to UPCI's theological self-understanding, this means all members of the Global Council of UPCI belong to the same church. UPCI's relationship with IGY is long standing, extending back into the communist period. The relationship was not manufactured to satisfy the conditions set down in Act CCVI of 2011; indeed the relationship precedes Act CCVI of 2011 by at least 30 years. On this basis, I state confidently that IGY is a member church of UPCI according to the religious self-understanding of these two churches. As an objective and neutral scholar of religion, I cannot call this religious self-understanding into question. Therefore, I concluded that IGY satisfies the conditions for registration laid down in Act CCVI of 2011 14/A § (1) points a) through c).

2.2. In my professional opinion, IGY is a church with a 100 year history.

The government expert disputes this, noting that because UPCI was established in 1945, it cannot demonstrate a 100 year organizational history (“A nemzetközi szervezet 100 éves múltjának igazolása is nehézségekbe ütközik”). In this instance the problem arises from the fact that the appointed expert has not attended carefully to the text of the law. Act CCVI of 2011 does not stipulate that the international organization must have a 100 history. The law stipulates at 14 § ca) that a religious community applying for recognition must have a 100 year international history, and then stipulates at 14/A § (1) points a) through c) that various types of international church membership are sufficient to demonstrate a 100 year history. The stipulation is not that the international church organization itself must have a 100 year history. Rather membership in an international church organization is taken as evidence of a 100 year international history.

In point of fact, very few international Protestant church organizations have a 100 year history. Many of them were established after WWII as an outgrowth of the ecumenical movement. For example, the Lutheran World Federation, an international organization of which the Lutheran Church in Hungary is a member, was established only in 1947. No one should infer from this that the history of the Lutheran Church begins in 1947. Much to the contrary, Lutheran history extends back almost 500 years to the start of the Protestant Reformation. Again, to use another example, the World Communion of Reformed Churches, which lists the Reformed Church in Hungary as a member, was established only in 2010. From this fact one cannot rightly infer that the history of the Reformed Church is less than twenty year old. Rather, the World Communion of Reformed Churches is the result of years of ecumenical work among Reformed churches around the world, whose common history extends back to John Calvin. In general, international church organizations are not established *ex nihil*, but are preceded by a common history. Therefore, membership in such organizations should be taken as evidence that a church shares an older and common history with churches in other parts of the world

Even at the national level, Protestant churches frequently do not have an organization structure that is 100 years old. The Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, for example, was established in 1948, but this hardly means Protestantism in Germany is less than 100 years. The Evangelical-Lutheran Church in America was established in 1988; the Presbyterian Church, USA was established in 1983; the United Methodist Church was established in 1968. However, none of these were new religious movements at the time of their establishment. Rather, each church was formed through the merger of early churches, which themselves had histories extending back to yet earlier churches.

UPCI, the church of which IGY is a member, was established in 1945. UPCI's organizational structure is therefore older than any of the churches mentioned in the preceding paragraph. According to UPCI's webpage, the church was established through the merger of two earlier Pentecostal churches, which themselves grew out of a Pentecostal movement which started in Topeka, Kansas in 1901 (<http://www.upci.org/about-u>). UPCI is therefore part of a Christian Pentecostal movement which is more than 100 years old.

As concerns the conditions of recognition laid down in Act CCVI of 2011, IGY appears no less qualified for recognition than the Hungarian Pentecostal Church (Magyar Pünkösdi

Egyház), which is currently registered as an incorporated church. In fact, both churches share the same history, which begins in Hungary around 1926 with a Pentecostal movement that was heavily influenced by Hungarian émigrés in America returning to Hungary to evangelize. Based on 2011 census data, the membership of both churches appears to be less than 0.1% of the total population. However, IGY is the demonstrable member of an international Pentecostal church. It therefore satisfies the conditions laid down in 14/A § (1) a) through c).

In my professional opinion as a scholar of religion, IGY satisfies the conditions for recognition as a church set forth in Act CCVI of 2011 14 § points a) through f).

Respectfully submitted,

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