# Szilvia Simándi – Adrienn Tengely – Márta Rakusz – Tímea Oszlánczi – Rita Acsán: Catholic Small Communities and community education and culture

*Absztrakt: Hazánkban a rendszerváltás után, 1990-ben újra lehetőség nyílt az egyház számára a nagyobb arányú társadalmi szerepvállalásra, ezáltal a közösségi és a felnőttkori művelődésbe való bekapcsolódásra is. Az 1990-es években megtartott egyházmegyei zsinatokon is kiemelten foglalkoztak a kérdéssel, s meghatározták ennek lehetőségeit, és a II. vatikáni zsinat szellemiségében a modern világ igényeihez alakított eszközeit. A rendszerváltás után a korábbi vallási egyesületek újraalakulására is lehetőség nyílt – melyek a két világháború között az egyházi felnőttnevelés fő színtereit jelentették –, azonban ezek ekkor már csak kis mértékben tudtak megújulni, s egyre inkább átadták a helyüket a lazább szerkezetű új típusú vallási kisközösségeknek és szerveződéseknek. Jelen kutatásunk során lokális vallási kisközösségekben igyekeztünk empirikus vizsgálatot készíteni. Munkánkban kiemelt figyelmet szántunk Heves településen működő vallási kisközösségeknek és szerveződéseknek, mely során a művelődési tevékenységet állítottuk a fókuszpontba. Munkánk főbb eredményeit jelen írásunk mutatja be. A publikáció elkészítését a Nemzeti Művelődési Intézet Közművelődési Tudományos Kutatási Program kutatócsoportok számára alprogramja támogatta.*

*Abstract: In Hungary after the democratic transition in 1990 the church had the possibility to take a bigger part in social responsibility, and through that in community and adult education and culture. In the diocese synods held in the 1990s this issue was highlighted and addressed, and the possibilities and tools - in the spirit of the Second Vatican Synod, but tailored to the needs of the modern world - were established. After the democratic transition it was possible for the former religious associations to reunite - which were the main platforms of religious adult education and culture between the two world wars -, however, these could renew only to a small extent, rather they gave the floor to new types of religious small communities and organizations, which had a looser structure. In our present research we performed empirical examination in local religious small communities. During our work we paid special attention to religious small communities and organizations operating in Heves town, and our focus was activities in community education and culture. The main findings of our work are presented in this paper. The research process and the preparation of the study were supported by the sub-program of the Cultural Research Program for Research Groups of the National Institute of Culture.*

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**The role of the Church nowadays in adult education and culture**

Literature on the topic interpret community in several different ways, from which the three most common approaches are the following (see Willmott 1986; Lee and Newby 1983; Crow and Allen 1994: Arapovics 2016, Varga and Vercseg 1998):

- Local community (place)
- Interest/elective communities - based not on locality, communities are kept together by aspects other than locality: identity, profession, ethnicity, etc.
- Intellectual, spiritual communion - in its weaker form it is an attachment to a certain place, group or notion (‘community spirit’), and it can mean a deep meeting, for example Christian communities.

Church communities can play a fundamental role in the life of a settlement, such as in the operation of communities, talent management, or in the preservation of traditions and in relation to different programs, events. Between 2016-2018 research was conducted (Szabó-Tóth and Várhelyi ed. 2018) on the social engagement of historical churches. The starting point of the research was that historical churches - in addition to their traditional activities in relation to religious life - undertake numerous roles highly important for society, and this research aimed at exploring these activities. At the same time the research highlights, that “it is hard to fight the tendency that less and less people go to church, to masses, indifference is high, and the reasons are atheist ideology of the previous dictatorship regime which made the practice of religion impossible, demography factors, indifference, material worldview, convenience and consumer approach. Traditional values tumbled, and religious service is carried out in a more and more complicated world.” (Gyulai and Várhelyi 2018, 86) The research covers traditional churches: Roman Catholic, Reformed, Greek Catholic and Evangelical denominations, church officials and institutions. (Várhelyi and Szabó-Tóth Kinga 2018). Through the examples of Catholic vicarages and Reformed congregations the research named, among others, the following communities and community activities, where the target age group is clear: group of Bible teachers; group of ministrant children; Rosary Association; Eucharist Prayer Group; expiation prayer group; partner dating group; Christian playing house / baby-mother club; kindergarten group; group about the questions of life and faith for twelve-years-old children; group of secondary school students; circle of university students, young parents and single adults; service for families with babies; Sunday school for elementary school students; Bible class for the elderly; presbyter training; groups on history, literature (Gyulai and Várhelyi 2018, 68-69). From the above research it is clear that the creation and management of community groups is among the activities of the church officials’ service. These activities can be multilayered and colorful, there are many possibilities from arts and crafts club to spine gymnastics. The generator of these communities is often the church leader in service, and in lucky cases these communities become self-sufficient (Gyulai and Várhelyi 2018). In addition, there are choirs in many vicarages, congregates with the contribution of chorus master.

**Frames and outcomes of the research**

Our research on the operation and cultural aspects of Catholic communities was implemented with the support of the National Education and Culture Institute's Community Education and Culture Scientific Research Program, Community Education and Culture grant sub program for research groups, in 2021-22 in the North-East Hungary region. In the early stage of our work (September-December 2021), we aimed at exploring the activities supporting community education and culture within the Catholic church between the two world wars, primarily based on the bishopric synod documents and statutes. After the exploration of the academic literature and historical sources, namely collecting the decrees of the bishopric synod statutes relating to community education outside of school and cultural communities, the documents were analyzed and typical processes and connections were established. We published the scientific results of the historical research under the title 'The issue of community education outside of school in the bishopric synods in the Horty Era'. It was found that adult education and culture was seen quite differently in the different bishoprics. Four distinctive content groups could be formed from the synod statutes. The first one is restricted to adult religious education, which meant the deepening and widening of the religious knowledge primarily based on catechism acquired in elementary school - supplemented by some liturgic knowledge - the primary stage of which was the mandatory church catechism on Sunday and holiday afternoons since the Synod of Trent. At the synods this was not considered as part of community education outside of school, instead it was handled totally separatly, though from time to time it was mentioned in connection with community education, that it is advised to give religious education in youth associations.

The second group meant the mentioning of religious erudition in a wider sense, for example, in the form of lectures on history of the church or art of the church.

The third group was the elaboration of various secular topics, mainly public life, social and economic issues, but strictly based on Catholic ideology, exclusively by 'trustworthy' lecturers. Its aim was evidently to strengthen the Catholic identity of the individual, to line up the masses of people in favor of the church's point of view in various public life topics, and eventually to strengthen Catholic society. Besides the above the fourth group seems less important in the synods, the 'classical' community education topics, that is activities aiming at the elevation of secular literacy and popular education, for example only the Synod in Eger in 1931 mentions specifically the support of courses on basic reading and writing. From this it is evident that the Church wanted to use off-school community education activities for the strengthening and spreading of the Catholic ideology, this was the main goal, and the development of the general literacy of adult people appeared only as a marginal element.

In the second phase of our work (January - April 2022), we undertook to learn about the activities of the Catholic Church supporting adult education and culture and cultural communities nowadays, primarily in the Nort-East Hungary region (Eger, Heves, Jászberény, Salgótarján, Szerencs, Terpes). We wanted to include regional capital cities, small towns as well as villages into our research. We searched the answers for the following questions from the interviewees, church and secular leaders of local catholic communiteies in relation to religious communities with cultural and educational activities.

Similarly, we considered it important to examine different types of communities. Accordingly, in our research we included traditional associations with a history of several hundred years (e.g., Franciscan and Dominican third order), as well as modern religious communities (e.g., Cursillo group). Similarly, in addition to associations with a sole purpose of religious devotion (e.g., Bible

circles) we also explored the operation of communities where religious life is connected to other - music or sport - activities (e.g., snooker, ping-pong group, choirs connected to vicarage life). In addition to the above, we considered it important to include different age groups in our research, so we examined communities with the participation typically of aged people (e.g., Rosary Associations), of middle-aged people (e.g. Weekend of Married Couples), and of youth and children (e.g. Scouts, Salesian groups). In our work we have included our students (Rita Acsán, Florentina Borosi, Szilvia Danyi, Zsolt Hamar, Adél Molnár, Krisztina Nagy) as well as professional partners (Eszter Buzás, Réka Madarász).

We searched the answers for the following questions from the interviewees, *church and secular leaders of local catholic communiteies* in relation to religious communities with cultural and educational activities:

- What are the primary goals, main activities of cultural communities?
- How did the number of members change over the years? How many members do they have presently?
- What is the age range of the members? What is the rate of women and men?
- Who are welcome to the community? How important it is for the community to involve new people? Is it their goal to involve non-religious people, that is evangelism?
- What works well even at present in the life of the community? What needs to be changed? Do you think there is a need to create new communities, or to renew the existing ones?
- What are your plans, goals for the future? Do you plan any changes in the life of the community?
- Are the leaders of the religious communities prepared for the community work?
- In your opinion, what is the difference between a religious and a secular community?

It must be noted that the planned survey coincided with the period of the pandemic, which can be considered as an obstacle of the research, since we were not able to meet in person with the interviewees in many places, we could only receive answers through online channels. In addition, the pandemic evidently influenced the activities supporting adult education and culture as well as community life, since we had numerous feedback saying that the referred activities had stopped, relapsed. For this reason, in our work we give a non-exhaustive picture based on the received answers, the results may not be considered representative.

The people who were interviewed, the spiritual and secular leaders of the local Catholic communities interpret community primarily as religious community: ‘The aim of a Christian community is that we reach salvation through living truly by the teaching of Jesus Christ.’ (Interviewee no. 4) To our question, as to what is the difference between a religious and a non-religious community, one of our interviewees replies: ‘I think the difference between a non-religious and a religious community is that in the center of a religious community there is somebody, who is God, and he is the reason why we are there. Of course, it is fun to be together and play, chat and live through different things together, but the common goal is one: to approach towards God. And this is, what’s missing from secular communities, because otherwise they live through everything else, like we do, except for this one thing. While approaching towards God we help each other on the way, and I think this is what makes religious communities more than secular ones.’ (Interviewee no. 3).

One of our questions aimed at finding out about the age range of the members, and the ratio of men and women in the community. From the answers it seems that it is the older people who are participating on a regular basis. As to the ratio of the sexes, there are somewhat more women than men. It is also worth examining children who join temporarily. From the ones who prepare for receiving First Communion, confirmation, there are few who remain in the life of the vicarage after the ceremony.

We found the following active communities: Bible circle, Men's Bible, Bible Lectures, Ping-Pong group, Snooker group, Meeting of Seekers (KKT), religious education group, choirs, rosary group, propitiation prayer group, Salesian group, but we also got a picture of some communities operating in the form of associations (Association for Christian Culture in Lajosváros), etc.

Although the pandemic did have an effect on the different activities, since there were much fewer personal gatherings, cultural group visits (e.g., to the Opera House), community bike tours, hiking, children's programs, during the interviews there were instances where they tried to remain active online, for which we give the following example: the primary goal of the Salesian community in Eger is to help the poor, disadvantaged youth. However, in Eger, not only they are the ones who attend the group, but children from average circumstances come too. Therefore, their other goal is that children from both backgrounds enjoy themselves, so that they find it important to experience community, love, tolerance, either through a game, stage play, arts and crafts activity, or common prayers. During the pandemic they continued their activities online, one hour a week. They tried to organized these events the same way, just like in person events. They had online games, plays, conversations, even arts and crafts activities. It was important for them that children do not loose contact with each other.

It was well articulated from the interviews that operating a community needs preparation and effort. We were curious whether the leaders of the religious communities receive any preparation for the work with communities. The answers were miscellaneous, there are communities where preparation for the work appears in a fully informal way, in others it is organized among the members, and there are communities with formal trainings built into the syllabus. For example, the leaders of the Salesian community have annual meetings where they help each other by sharing their work experiences. They find it a great help, since according to them, to lead a community is not easy. But managing a community appears in the frame of formal education as well, as one council representative of Jászberény vicarage told us: 'Nowadays the pastor theology and catechetica subjects wonderfully teach how to do it right.'

To our question, who is welcome in the community, all answers were the same, to which we give an example quoting one of our interviewees: 'Basically everyone. Let's see who was around Jesus. The poor, the rich, acknowledged people as well as people discarded from society. He invited people from everywhere. Jesus invites everyone today too. It would be crucial also for our church community to involve people, nevertheless, I see that it is not common practice'. (Interviewee no. 2) As for the goals, plans for the future, we received almost steady answers: involvement of youth and new members is the most typical answer. Mostly they address children and elderly people, they are the ones who are open to be active in small communities.

We received the most detailed data from Heves town, so in the upcoming part of our work we focus on religious life adult education and culture through the example of Heves town. Heves town (originally a country town, later great village, then town), lies in the North-East Hungary region, on the Great Plain territory, in Heves county, 42 kilometers from the regional capital. This territory -

inhibited before the Hungarian conquest - had been a hub for the smaller nearby settlements since the reign of Saint Stephen I. In the Heves vicarage there were two priests serving. The Dean has been leading the community of the local congregation since 2010, and after a long hiatus the town now has a new chaplain since 2020. Considering that the father confessors have a crucial role in the formation and operation of religious communities, to the guidance of whom they are entrusted to, we find it fundamental for the mapping of local religious groups to listen to the opinion of the fathers. It is important for Christian people to be members of a community - both priests agreed on this. It is not easy to keep personal contact with and give personal help to communities, because you need to build trust and have sense of responsibility, motivation, you have to walk with and before them at the same time, all these have to be present in community forming (Interviewee no. 12 and 13).

In the following we quote from the interviews conducted with the leaders of three active communities in Heves town:

“The Heves Group of the Charity Service of the Order of Malta was established in 1994. The goal was to raise and distribute donations, with the help of people knowing each other. The activity was mainly helping people in need, primarily distributing food, clothing and other practical things, which were donated by others for this purpose. The number of members changes between 15-30, mainly people over 60, 90 percent women. Before we used to organize excursions, pilgrimages, programs for children, mainly in summer. Unfortunately, these were and are all cancelled due to the pandemic. At present we would even be happy if we could continue our long-standing work.” (Interviewee no. 6)

“20 years ago there was a Holy Sprit Seminar organized here in Heves. People attending church were addressed. There were people who knew each other, and there were ones who did not. Our goal: prayer, laudation and mediate for our nation, for our church community, our families, for conversions, for the youth and for a lot of intention for prayer. We operate with 17 members, but 20 years ago there were still 40 members. 3 men, 14 women. The members are mainly above 60 years, 30% is young people.” (Interviewee no. 8)

“A cantor educated in music and experienced in leading a choir arrived at Heves. The one time teacher choir members approached the vicar, then the cantor, that they want to organize a choir. Their main mission is to make church rituals, masses more ceremonial, and to acquaint people with church music. The choir was established with 8 people. After the first introductory public performance the number of members increased to 18, then to 26. There was drop out as well, but new members joined too, while the constant group of 25 people formulated, who became stabile members of the choir. The age range of the members is from 35 to 70. But the choir fell apart because the chorus-master moved from Heves. The concerts are missed not only by the choir members, the people attending church, but also by the inhabitants of the town. If the choir was formed again, the former members would help with their experiences with pleasure.” (Interviewee no 9)

Furthermore, in Heves it is worth presenting the former Youth Choir, the influence of which can be well traced even today: many of the young people involved by the choir decades ago you can see on the benches of the chuch - as mothers, fathers with their adult children. In the mid 1980’s the members Heves Vicarage regularly used to attend the Nagymaros Youth Summit; this is where they first heard the Christian guitar songs of Jenő Sillye. They had the intention to bring this experience “home”, so that the can take part in such common singing not only once a year. They

recruited about fifteen people for the singing with Katalin Szántó, the cantor of the time. It was not intentional, but at that time only girls formed the group - and this hasn't changed since. At the celebration on 31 October 1987 Dr. István Seregély, the archbishop of Eger at the time also listened to the introductory performance of the newly formed group. The choir welcomed new applicants. Zsolt Acsán became the leader, who regularly visited the schools of the town, talked to bible class teachers and sang and played some songs on the guitar in bible classes for children. At the same time in many cases the parents themselves wanted their children to become the member of the community: many of them also attended the Nagymaros Youth Summit, and from the beginning they supported, urged the realization of the idea to form a choir. Due to the great interest the age range for the recruitment had to be extended: generally, students from the upper classes of elementary school and secondary school were expected, but during the history of the choir the youngest member was a first grade elementary school student, and the oldest was a doctoral candidate student. The golden era of the choir was around the mid 1990's, in these years the choir operated with about 30 members. With the youngest members the parents also often attended the rehearsals. Knowing all this, although the community used the 'youth choir' name, it kept together not only people of this age. The one and a half hour long rehearsals were kept on Sunday afternoons, one third of it was spent on learning new songs, one third on music for joy, and in the last third the spiritual father gave bible lesson for the participants. This half an hour bible lesson gave rise to the Bible Youth group. The choir performed from time to time, they sang oratorio at masses, the Passio at Easter, and they participated at church masses and they also played the guitar. They also did charity work, every Christmas they performed in the retirement home and in the home for the physically disabled. They considered each of their performances as testimony, a form of evangelism. In summer they organized excursions to the nearby swimming pool in Jászszentandrás or to Szilvásvárad. When it was possible, they continued to attend the Nagymaros Youth Summit, and they were invited to Breganze, to the Italian twin town of our town. Although the original idea that started the community was related to songs with guitar, the 'secret and not admitted' goal of the leader was to build a Christian community, the singing was only the 'honey pot', a tool for building and strengthening the community. The goal was to create a Christian community, where the members have a good time together, and through singing and praying together they experience communion in the common faith. The members of the choir were able to become the members of a friendly and fraternal community where they could find a helper not only in singing, but also in other areas of life. The choir 'fulfilled its mission' by the early 2000's, it ceased to exist in a natural way. There was no significant fluctuation among members, it was not typical for members to exit the group, but after a while there were no new members either. The members became adults, they moved to a different city to study at college, university, from where they were not able to come home to attend rehearsals. Some got married, and there was one member, who was still attending as a bride. There were no new applications, therefore the choir ceased to exist, but the Bible Youth group created through the choir kept operating for another decade. After almost two decades, a couple of years ago, thanks to the organizing work of one of the founding members, today there are masses with guitar again in the church. (Interviewee no. 4)

Another clear example of religious adult education, learning is the one-time Weekend of Married Couples, which was stopped being organized by the end of the 2010's, however we think it is worth mentioning as a good example. The Weekend of Married Couples community was founded by a local couple, József Szalai and his wife. They met the Weekend of Married Couples Movement at a retreat, and a year later they participated at the Basic training weekend program, and they

decided that they would like to pass on the experience to as many couples as possible. More than twenty couples in Heves passed the basic training, these couples formed the local community. They wanted to represent in the world the importance of love, marriage and child raising through Christ. The group gathered every first Tuesday of the month at the vicarage. The meetings started with prayers, followed by the so called HDYF circle (How Do You Feel?), during which everybody got a chance to share whatever happened to them since the last meeting. As their founder wrote: 'shared joy is double joy, shared pain is half pain'. After this each time a different couple facilitated a group conversation on a topic that they had prepared for in advance. The evening ended with prayer. The community members participated at the annual group excursions, cooking parties, but they considered the organization of the Christian Charity Ball their biggest pride. The donations of the Ball were offered to the organizers of the Bible camp, but they donated for the church as well, for the chasubles. (Interviewee no. 2)

**Conclusions**

The extent of the social role of church communities vary from town to town. The examples and best practices presented also show that a number of community education and culture related elements can be found, for example the operation of the communities, talent development, and preservation of traditions in the form of various progams, events. With our research we wish to contribute to and enrich the works related to adult education and culture: we think that the community education and culture activities of the Catholic church is a less examined area of the historical researches of this special field. Also, we would like to recommend our work to be used in education: on the university majors Community Organization and Teacher of Community Education and Culture, with special attention to the 'Religion and culture' and 'Cultural researches - cultural community values' subjects. Our goal is that students get a wider view on the educational and cultural practices of religious communities.

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