

Partner Church Council Workshop Report  
Friday, June 26, 2004  
Long Beach, CA  
Given By Denny Davidoff

Something is very gently,  
invisibly, silently,  
pulling at me - a thread  
or net of threads  
finer than cobweb and as  
elastic. I haven' t tried  
the strength of it. No barbed hook  
pierced and tore me. Was it  
not long ago this thread  
began to draw me? Or  
way back? Was I  
born with its knot about my  
neck, a bridle? Not fear  
but a stirring  
of wonder makes me  
catch my breath when I feel  
the tug of it when I thought  
it had loosened itself and gone.

It is my intention this afternoon to give you some of the details and, I hope some of the flavor of the work I have been doing together with the members of the Economic Fairness and Awareness Task Force, since the Fall of 2002. Since our colleague, Emod, is here in person to tell the Transylvanian partners side of the story, I shall pretty much stick with what I know here in the United States.

I was recruited to this chair's job in August of 2002 by David Keyes. I had managed to serve four years on the UUA Board of Trustees and then the eight years following as the Association's Moderator, the years between 1989 and 1993, steering clear of any involvement in the Partner Church movement. There were numerous reasons for my staying aloof: not wishing to step on the toes of my predecessor, Nat Gulbrandsen was one. A commitment to spending as much time as possible visiting our member congregations was another. Resisting long trips abroad for the first six years of my service, concentration on separating the CUC from the UUA, my husband's health, and so forth. My maternal grandmother used to say in Yiddish, "You can't dance at all the weddings." And how true that is when you are in high office with the UUA.

I am told that the fact that I knew little, had never been to Transylvania, and thus was likely to not have many, if any, biases, was part of my charm as a potential task force chair. Now I know a lot but I think I am still relatively free of bias. There is no status quo I seek to preserve, no tradition I have need to cling to, no agenda to cloud my objectivity. Depending on what I say, this makes me either fair minded or dangerous. Or both.

When I became engaged to Jerry in the summer of 1955, three months before our October wedding, I felt comfortable with his family. The elder Davidoffs summered in the same town as my parents. Our fathers golfed together and our mothers had mutual friends they lunched with. Everybody lived in New York City.

Our grandparents had all been immigrants in the last decade of the nineteenth century. We were middle class, well educated, of Jewish extraction, and Democrats.

I felt comfortable. But, you know as well as I that, when you get closer in, the picture gets more complex. There are family secrets, family foibles, family jokes, family traditions.

That's pretty much how it's been with me and the Partner Church Council. When I began this work, I kind of knew you. I certainly felt comfortable. But, inevitably, closer in, the picture gets more complex. You are a family, a huge family with a culture of your own. I am just beginning to get the hang of it. So I consider myself still mostly an outsider. I feel welcome, but detached. And that is probably a good thing in the long run.

We have done three rounds of research and are still to complete the fourth and final round. Initially, we selected ten partnerships of long duration and did 90 minute interviews with three people in each congregation, 60 interviews in all, to establish a baseline of data. This was in the Spring of 2002. Emod did the interviews in Transylvania and we engaged Amanda McGregor of Sharon, MA to do the interviews here. Amanda had spent a year after her graduation from college working as an English teacher in Kolescvar which made her a likely choice.

The ten congregations we chose in the U.S. were First Parish, Concord, MA, River Road in Bethesda, MD, Fairfax in Oakton, VA, East Shore in Bellvue, WA, the Oakland, CA congregation, First Unitarian in Madison, WI, First Parish, Bedford, MA., the Boise Idaho Fellowship, Unity Church in St. Paul, MN and First Unitarian in Memphis, TN.

Question: What have been the significant milestones in your partnership to date?

The first trip was a huge milestone for each individual and for the church, just the fact that you were connected with a group so far away and in such remote area.

In 2001, we created something very controversial. . . .a business partnership with the group. We were trying to figure out the most effective way to help the village that was more formal than what we'd been doing.

The first trip was in June of '94, and in '95, we brought over the minister, his wife and his two kids, and they stayed two weeks, which was another huge

milestone. That was an introduction to the rest of the congregation.

In '95 and '96 we raised funds for a combine. We raised it over time and gave the funds to them. They bought it. It was an old, Russian one. It broke down and didn't have parts so just sat and sat and sat. It was just really typical of the way the government works over there and how difficult it is to get what you need. We can't imagine how they got this, you know how remote the village is. It was an eyesore, and recently they sold it off to someone else. It was really well intentioned, trying to help out. They seemed to really want a combine, and we helped to do that. But overall it represented something that really didn't work in the end.

*Question: How would you describe your partnership to a friend? What is it like?*

First I would point out historically this is a connection between our church and Transylvania. The main point is that it's a way to help these small churches that have been isolated for so long, not only geographically, but politically. It was very painful. It's a way to bring them out of isolation and to give them encouragement.

I am so upset about our country right now and how we think we know the answers to everything. I know that our money helps them, but I wonder if the ideas we push on them might be a little too soon for them.

*Question: What has been the most difficult aspect of the partnership? Why?*

There are cultural issues. One of them is that Americans are very detail oriented, and Transylvanians are not. We ask for details, and they stonewall us.

Again, it goes back to the cultural issue, that we want to share ourselves and our money and efforts and all that stuff, and because the communication is so difficult from English to Hungarian, people have different expectations on both sides, and we have to try to be really clear in communicating that to be sure that we don't cause issues trying to do good work.

We've purchased, for example, we've brought village handwork and needlework back here to be purchased, and some of the women sent things that were quite old and not in good shape, but luckily we were able to sell them anyway. When we went to the village and wanted to purchase things personally, the women came with all their things and some of them appeared to have really hard feelings if we didn't choose their things, and yet, they need to understand that Americans are going to buy what's appealing to them.

So this time we're going this summer and bringing back things to be sold in an art gallery, but I've sent information to the minister and women's association president for requirements: certain sizes, colors, newer, clean. We've given them some real clear direction on that.

After all of the sixty interviews were completed, we gave the completed questionnaires to a Washington, DC-based graduate student, Jennifer Viillamez,

to write a report. Jen was a candidate for a Master's Degree in International Affairs and Development at The George Washington University at the time of this writing. I want to read from Jen's summary on financial relationships to you:

Because each partnership is unique, it is difficult to draw concrete conclusions about their financial relationships. However, in all partnerships surveyed, the flow of money from the American partner to the Transylvanian partner is substantially greater than the flow of funds from Transylvania to the United States. This discrepancy brings into question the economic purpose of the partnerships. If the intent of the partnership is to help sponsor economic development in Transylvania, then an unequal financial relationship is reasonable and justified. However, if the goal of the partnership is, in fact, financial partnership in the true sense of the word, then the relationship is not an effective one. This issue should be addressed by the partners, and possibly by the UUA/PCC, so that the relevant parties are fully aware of the implications of their financial goals and decisions.

In either case, the financial inequity has serious implications for the partnerships. Regardless of whether the intent of the partnership financially is to sponsor economic development or to stay true to partnership, financial inequity can affect the partners' interactions in other areas of the relationship.

For the American partner, there is a risk of being seen merely as a source of aid, a concern expressed by several interviewees. Also, because financial support is often easier to provide and more tangible to both parties, there is a danger that it may consume the partnership activities. (Fundraisers are easy and familiar activities to organize, so they tend to play a larger role in the partnerships than do other activities, such as letter writing or cultural awareness events. Note: This is a general observation; it does not hold true for all partnerships surveyed.) One interviewee, for example, described how the American partner's role is largely and most regularly one of providing financial support to Transylvania. "Friendship" and "communication" are ideal goals for which they strive; however, providing financial support is a clear role that meets a real need, so it has become more of a focus.

As a result of the financial inequity, the Transylvanian partner risks developing a sense of inferiority and indebtedness to the American partner, as previously described. In fact, many Transylvanian interviewees mentioned such sentiments in their survey responses. Also, according to several Transylvanian interviewees,

with a history of humanitarian aid coming to them from various Western European countries (most notably Germany and Austria) in the early 1990s, the American partners were sometimes viewed as yet another donor for the congregations. For many Transylvanian congregations, this problem has been overcome; however, for others, it remains difficult for ministers to explain the nature of the partnerships to the congregations. There are also other complications with the American partner providing financial aid to the Transylvanian partner. One Transylvanian interviewee, for instance, described the difficulty of making some members of the congregation understand that the financial support from the United States is community and project-oriented and cannot be divided among congregation members individually. The question of distribution of funds for scholarships and other projects has also been problematic for a few partners, though most have created systems that work for their partnerships.

In the Fall of 2003, we took the Villamez report on the road to test its assumptions with members of partnerships who had not participated in the original interviews. This was round two. Olivia Holmes and members of the task force created a focus group design and I arranged to gather groups of eight to ten people, clergy and laity, in San Francisco, Seattle, Bethesda, and Wayland, MA. And the ever obliging Emod agreed to do a similar protocol in Transylvania.

Here are voices from the focus group in San Francisco, kind of sad and hopeful at the same time:

In thinking about Transylvania, the first thing that comes to my mind is money. If, as a parishioner, I'm struggling or I've experienced an economic downturn or whatever we want to call it, I find I don't want to get involved if it's going to mean money. Frankly, if I don't have it or I'm doing all I can to be supporting my church with my pledge, I am not going to be involved at all in Transylvania at all because it's only equated oftentimes with money. That's unfair for me and unfair for them because there is far more that can happen and yet our focus, it feels, is only about money.

One of the concerns that I have is that if we are directly supporting the minister of the village with money, what effect would that have -- short term and long term -- on that village congregation taking responsibility to support their minister which should be a primary responsibility from my perspective?

We don't really have any joint projects. We raise money several times a year and we raised large amounts of money in the past six years. The decisions about that on our part are made either by the Partner Church Committee or the plan is approved by the Board of Trustees but usually initiated by the minister. Over there I think it all comes to their minister so I assume that much of the decision making about what is going to be raised is by the minister or by the ministers, theirs and ours.

I hope that at some point we would be able to say that we have been able to establish a mutual agreement on what a partnership can be, what we would want it to be and that it hopefully is moving in the direction that would be more of an interpersonal relationship between the congregations and the people in the congregations. Not to focus on Americans giving money to needy people.

After Emod and I had completed the focus groups, the materials went to yet another Washington DC-based graduate student, Roland Schine, for round three. Rolanda completed her overview and report for us in January 2004 and I was able to share it with the Partner Church Council exec at their February meeting.

They didn't like it much. They couldn't hear people talking about how transformative partner church work is. They missed having people talk enthusiastically about projects, about freedom issues, about a larger vision, about getting involved in the Romanian economy. But, while there are people who share those enthusiasms, that's not what was talked about at the focus groups. And, our focus, our *raison d'être*, is economic fairness and awareness!

In a section titled Partnership Challenges, Rolanda writes:

Overall the focus groups listed the financial relationship as the issue that causes the most strain in the partnership. There have been issues of distrust among some American partners and concerns of possible misuse or lack of transparency in the uses of funds on the Transylvanian side. While this is not the **norm**, it does highlight the troubles that can accompany their financial efforts. Both sides have expressed a desire to move away from the focus that is placed on money, yet most of the partnering occurs in this area.

And, discussing the impact of financial donations, Rolanda observes:

Financial matters consistently arose in all the surveys [Note: she means focus groups] from the U.S. and Transylvania. However, the perception of what the real issue was differed between partners. From the American perspective, they feel the challenge of balancing what they can afford versus what is expected (whether perceived correctly or incorrectly) to be donated. They feel there is a cultural misunderstanding of Americans being "rich" and, therefore, being able to contribute whatever is necessary.

On the other hand, while the Transylvanian partners do not diffuse the importance of monetary contributions to their churches or communities, the [reports] indicate that many of the improvements they wish to see from their future partnerships lies in the non-monetary areas. It is perceived by the Transylvanians that there is a general lack of effort on the U.S. side to foster the partnerships in other ways besides through donations. This perception was even confirmed by one of the U.S. parishioners who said that "money is the easiest way to respond and relate."

I think, I hope Emod will have more to say about that.

Well, you get the picture. There is a great deal of data to sift through and we should all be endlessly grateful for the funding from the Fund for Unitarian Universalism that has made it possible to gather it.

In the last six weeks, I have been doing phone interviews to gather information about three specific projects: the Szentgeroce Medical Clinic, the Madison Tractor Project and Project Harvest Hope. I have also interviewed people in three different congregations about scholarships. I intend to complete this work and write a report this summer.

Finally, for round four, the Task Force will meet August 22-24 to create a structure for our final report and to draft guidelines for the future. We plan to present the draft guidelines to PCC activists and solicit your feedback in four regional meetings between October and early January. And, as always, the process will be replicated in Transylvania.

I'm way over my time limit so I'll end for now.