

A Brief History of the Partner Church Movement

How many of you have heard of or read about the fall of communism in 1989? Do you remember hearing about the Berlin wall being torn down? Well, during that same time, communist governments lost power in several countries in Central Europe, including two where Unitarians lived, Romania and Hungary. [Show on the map.] Democracy, a form of government that allows greater freedom for its people, replaced communism. This was a very welcome change for Unitarians living in the countries of Romania and Hungary. It meant they could worship freely again and rebuild the small village churches scattered around their homeland of Transylvania (the region in Romania where Unitarians live). A number of churches in Canada and the United States wanted to help them rebuild and in 1993—just 5 years later—the Partner Church Council was officially formed. So the current Partner Church Council Program is only about 10 years old—and it has almost 200 North American UU churches partnered with Unitarians and Universalists around the world.

But that's actually the *second* half of the story! The first half takes place almost 90 years ago, after World War I. When WWI ended in 1918, new country boundaries were drawn around Central Europe. It's hard for us in the United States to imagine that, but that's what often happened after wars in Europe. At the end of World War I, the eastern part of Hungary (all of Transylvania) was taken from Hungary (which had lost the War) and awarded to Romania. So Transylvania stopped being part of Hungary and became instead the Northern third of Romania. [Find Transylvania on the world map.] All of the Unitarians in Transylvania had been Hungarian citizens and all of them spoke Hungarian.

Unitarians in North America were very concerned about what these huge changes would mean for the Unitarians in Transylvania. They sent two different groups of ministers to investigate and report on the treatment of the Unitarians and other religious minority groups by their new (Romanian) government. The North American Unitarians also set up 100 pairs of congregations and called it "The Sister Church Program." The Sister Church pairs stayed in touch with one another through the 1920's, some lasted into the 1930's despite the Great Depression. But these very first partnerships didn't last long. The next big war—World War II, in the 1940s—brought communism to the area. The countries of Romania and Hungary kept their boundaries this time, but they were under control of the communist government of the USSR. The people were not free to communicate with their sister churches in the US and many Unitarian churches became run down.

Finally, with the fall of communism in 1990, the Romanian government changed and Canadian and US Unitarians were again able to visit Romania. Many Unitarians in both places were eager to be connected once again as one-to-one pairs of congregations. And it was natural that the newly paired churches were again called "Sister Churches."

But soon the children in many of the North American church school classes began to protest. The boys, especially, said, "Why do we have a Sister Church?" That's against our principles; it's not inclusive language! The girls said, "Well, it can't be called our Brother Church, because that wouldn't be inclusive either." Their teachers said, "Maybe you

could think of a better name for the program, one that would be inclusive." And, amazingly, in a great many church schools the boys and girls said they thought a much better name would be "Partner Churches." All the adults agreed with the children that "Partner Church" was a much better name than "Sister Church," and that is what the program has been called ever since.

So today's Partner Church Program is a revival of sorts of a much older program with the same goals: to connect Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists around the world; to share our resources to build friendships and strong congregations.