PLANNING A VISIT FROM OUR PARTNERS

Experience the Partnership

by Barbara Weber, Main Line Unitarian Church, Devon, PA

The 400th anniversary celebration of the first use of “Unitarian” in Várfalva/Moldovenesti, Romania, was a wonderful, inspirational event (UUPCC News, Spring 2014) for a group of pilgrims from Main Line Unitarian Church (MLUC) in Devon, Pennsylvania. Our leaders, Associate Minister Rev. Morgan Mclean and Partner Church Committee chair Jon Bass, took this opportunity to talk with Rev. Zsolt Barabás and lay president Ernő Kolozsi about the possibility of a visit from Várfalva. Like previous pilgrims, we were enthusiastic and motivated to strengthen the MLUC partnership when we returned home. We had always dreamed of sharing the excitement with all those in our congregation who could not make the trip. But since 1992 when our partnership started, no one from Várfalva had ever visited MLUC.

Rev. McLean mentioned a possible visit in her September Transylvanian Thanksgiving service. The congregation was intrigued and the first donation was received. Monthly Skype calls with Rev. Barabas established a real interest in Várfalva. Tentative dates were checked on the church calendar and reviewed with our ministers and the board, all of whom gave their enthusiastic support. Over the winter we clarified our goals. The Várfalva delegation should experience our church, our daily life, our faith, and our families. Our large suburban congregation, with over 620 members spread over many communities, should experience the friendship, the historical religious connection, and the power of our international partnership as they got to know our guests. MLUC’s Partner Church Committee thought we could sponsor up to eight visitors.

The UUPC website and John Dale, travel coordinator, provided helpful information. Cathy Cordes and others who had hosted visitors from Transylvania were consulted. This event would mean extensive contributions of time and money. By March we had decided to make a donation request to the congregation with information about the project rather than create a fundraising event. We now had a better idea of airfare (Kolozsvár to Newark, NJ) and other costs. Our committee chair applied for and received a UUPCC travel grant. Homestays, potluck suppers, and a large force of volunteers would help minimize costs.

Later that month, we put a large cartoon airplane on the church lobby bulletin board with pictures of our friends from Várfalva peering out the windows and added a thermometer to document the growing contributions. At her April installation service, Rev. McLean designated the offering for our guests’ travel expenses, and Rev. Carol Taylor, retired Minister of Religious Education, who started the partnership 22 years ago, reviewed our joint history.

In our monthly newsletter and weekly electronic announcements, we tried to strike a balance between generating enthusiasm for the visit and asking for contributions. After services, committee members stood under a helium airplane balloon to solicit volunteers, ideas, and donations. Every donor received a handwritten thank-you note.

When the October 20–28 dates were confirmed, we had five months to prepare. Our previous committee chair became the visit treasurer, tracking donations and projected expenses, paying bills, and maintaining a detailed account of finances through the planning, implementation, and payment stages. He worked closely with our current chair to communicate with Rev. Barabas about travel logistics, required documents, and letters of support. The Golden Rule travel agency, which specializes in trips by religious groups, was chosen to do the airline reservations.

The planning team set to work using their diverse computer skills, organizational abilities, and networking talents. They scrambled to touch base with the musicians, ushers, greeters, photographers, decorators, cooks, and potluck
meal organizers before summer vacations made contact difficult. We confirmed the home hosts, and they started communicating with their guests by e-mail and Facebook.

Ministers, church staff, and the committee worked in close collaboration to schedule events. Since some hosts lived a 30-to-40-minute ride from the church, making it impossible to get back and forth to host homes during the day, a small meeting room in the church furnished with sofas was designated as a hospitality center and reserved for our guests to use at any time. To help make them comfortable, we planned to include in their orientation an extensive building tour from our solar roof shingles to our basement emergency generator. The hospitality center, kept supplied with beverages and snacks, proved to be a relaxing place for our visitors to take a break.

The first schedule expanded through the summer into a large Google document with a page for every day to keep our comprehensive information accessible and organized. This document helped us organize hosts, drivers, photographers, invitations, translators, meals, locations, needed tasks, and contact information. A planning team member remained in contact with each volunteer to coordinate details.

By the middle of July, airplane tickets had been purchased. We discussed plans with the music director for a joint choir to sing Hungarian hymns and invited members and youth who sing or play in bands to participate in a music program. We started work on a banner to hang across the driveway, welcoming our visitors in English and Hungarian. We created guest lists for meals and invited ministers, current and past committee members, and those who had traveled to Várfalva to a large welcome dinner. We invited a shorter list of church leaders, large donors, and those active in the partnership to the Thanksgiving dinner. For a farewell dinner on the last evening, we invited the hosts and their guests.

The author of our Small Group Ministry (SGM) sessions agreed to prepare a related curriculum. With material from the website of the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists, she created two excellent sessions that would be used in October to engage our 135 SGM participants in thoughtful conversations about our guests’ theology and history. A member of the planning team created a 20-page illustrated booklet, “We Are Partners,” describing the culture, religion, and history of our partners to give to every family with elementary-age children.

While most of our guests spoke excellent English, two were very limited. Since we had encouraged them to come, we sought additional translators. Besides our 93-year-old Hungarian translator who has been working with us since the start of our partnership, we located a Hungarian nursing graduate student and her father, and, through contact with a local Hungarian group, an American who learned Hungarian during his studies in Budapest. These three people were new to our church and eager to participate. In addition, Rev. McLean invited Rev. Andrew Weber from the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Newark, Delaware, who had been very involved in the MLUC partnership at his home church, to contribute additional translation assistance.

By September, many details remained unsettled. We needed drivers, cleanup crews, and food preparers. Every week before choir rehearsal, a group of eight practiced two Hungarian hymns so they could lead the congregation in our joint service. Publicity would be required for all events open to the whole congregation. We wanted to invite everyone to a local high school football game, a Haiti social action presentation, Saturday afternoon service projects, a pancake breakfast and a lunch catered by a church member, and an all-church potluck supper preceding the intergenerational music program.

The Várfalva church designated the path from their parsonage to the church as the “Main Line Walkway”; we wanted to return the honor with the “Várfalva Walkway” to our front door. The wooden sign was constructed by a church member, and we found another who does calligraphy and was willing to use a wood burning kit to complete the lettering.

In the beginning of October Rev. McLean gathered home and meal hosts to discuss questions, expectations, and schedules. We had the daily schedule translated and emailed it to the travelers. We reviewed room reservations and setup instructions with the building staff. We recruited several young women members to join the women guests for
a conversation about balancing family and professional life in their different cultures. We made trial runs on the local tours, prepared nametags for the guests and translators, and purchased postcards, stamps, snacks, and small souvenirs for a gift bag for each visitor. The volunteer list grew with shoppers, pie bakers, tour guides, a pumpkin buyer, banner hangers, gardeners, and decorators.

The congregation was as excited as the travelers when they finally arrived late on the evening of October 20. It was the start of a very busy week. Besides the catered breakfast and lunch, the Thanksgiving dinner, and the potluck supper, meals for the visitors included box lunches on the ride from Newark airport, breakfasts with their home hosts, a lunch of cheese steak sandwiches in a member’s home, a Chinese takeout supper at church, hamburgers and hotdogs at a local Jewish deli, an all-church Sunday lunch prepared by the youth, and small dinners with their host’s family.

While the focus was on deepening the congregation-to-congregation partnership, not just sightseeing, we also considered significant local or UU history and places of particular interest to our visitors, including farms, a classroom, and a dentist’s office. Taking advantage of the rich history and culture of the Philadelphia area, we took our visitors on a train ride to the city, where they saw the Liberty Bell, Independence Hall, a local brewery, and the First Unitarian Universalist Church and, like Rocky, ran up the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. During the week they visited a farmers market, Valley Forge National Park, a potato chip factory, a community garden, and discount stores. They also visited a retirement community for a tour and lunch with church members who are residents there.

We tried to keep our goals in mind, introducing our guests individually to our members and providing opportunities for conversation. At meals our guests were encouraged to sit at different tables, with translators if needed. Hosts were mindful of finding the balance between doing everything and relaxing, although we were told, “We can always sleep next week.”

Despite our hard work and extensive publicity, we had no idea how many would attend the potluck supper. About a hundred signed up to bring food, so we were thrilled when over 130 people arrived. Extra tables were quickly set up to accommodate everyone. A highlight of the evening was the crowd pouring outside to see the unveiling of our Várfalva Walkway sign. A large number of youth performed and then stayed overnight to prepare for their church lunch the next day. There were tears in our guests’ eyes when we told them we have never have had such a large turnout for a potluck supper. After listening to several music groups, our guests demonstrated Hungarian dances, much to everyone’s delight.

Both Sunday morning services were well attended. Our guests participated as ushers, greeters, and choir members. Rev. Barabás stood under a paper reconstruction of the pulpit crown in the Várfalva church and delivered a moving sermon, “We are One: Celebrating Our Partnership,” and expressed his warm feelings of being at home with us.

Sunday afternoon our guests explored similarities and differences in church leadership with MLUC board members, then had an open and productive conversation with the Partner Church Committee to discuss the visit experience and the future of our partnership.

We thought we had prepared for everything—but we did not expect a last-minute request to visit New York City, inspired by our visitors’ view of the city lights on their inbound flight. After analyzing costs and logistics, we created a simple sightseeing itinerary for early Tuesday morning that allowed our visitors to view the Statue of Liberty and make a quick tour of Wall Street and Times Square before flying home.

Using our spreadsheet, we identified over a hundred congregation and community volunteers and sent them thank-you notes on cards printed with a picture of our guests, their signatures, and the words, “Thank you very much” and “Köszönöm szépen.” The visit was a wonderful success for all. Almost every event large or small included congregants who had never visited Várfalva. Now our entire congregation has a personal understanding of partnership, ten youth have started communicating with newly matched pen pals and many at MLUC are dreaming of our next joint undertaking.
Climbing the steps and jumping for joy.
*(Rocky was the first western movie our visitors saw after communism ended)*

Preteen pen-pals reunite.

The Várfalva Walkway sign is unveiled.
Rev. Barabás addresses the congregation.

Translator and guests sing a goodbye toast.

Visit to the Statue of Liberty—Ernő’s dream comes true.