

Charismatics Under Fire

Despite Hungary's democratic politics, charismatic believers are harassed and falsely accused of illegal behavior.

Faith Church in Budapest, Hungary, has grown in 21 years from a seven-person cell group to the biggest church in all of Europe—but not without taking some heavy blows along the way. During the church's early years, the communist police accused it of partaking in drug trafficking and sex orgies and tried to close it down time and time again.

Even now, under democracy, and with Hungary on its way into the European Union, the harassments have not subsided. In the last year the Hungarian internal revenue service conducted more than a dozen investigations against Faith Church dependencies—finding no evidence of illegal or irregular practices but keeping Faith Church staff, as well as the media, busy.

The media increasingly resorts to bold lies to smear the charismatic church, says senior pastor Sándor Németh. In a recent tragedy, a father killed his own sons, and the press promptly reported that the father was a “member of Faith Church.” Németh countered that the man was unknown to any of the Faith Church pastors, and it turned out he was a member of an unrelated denomination.

“The smear is getting wilder,” Németh says, “and so far we have not succeeded in breaking out of it.”

Faith Church spokesman Peter Morvay told Charisma that the last Internal Security Report, issued by the government near the end of 1999, highlights “growing religious cults” as a major threat to Hungary's “stability.”

“There is no other group falling under the government category of ‘cults’ that grow like Faith Church. This is clearly aimed

at us," Morvay said, adding that "Hungary is increasingly trading drugs from South America and arms from Ukraine and Russia."

"The Security Report does not even make mention of these highly criminal and violent activities," he says. "Instead it targets a church that helps people become law-abiding and productive citizens."

The background is ideological, with deep roots in Hungarian and European history. Hungary became a Roman Catholic country 1,000 years ago. It was touched by the Reformation, and the Reformed and Lutheran churches are still relatively strong in the country. But in the quest for a new national identity after the fall of European communism in 1989, the Catholic forces in both the church and state took the lead, claiming that Hungary must return to its Catholic roots.

Peter Hack, a leading member of parliament in Hungary and an elder in Faith Church, showed Charisma the legendary Crown of St. Stephen that on Jan. 1, 2000, was brought by procession to the Budapest Parliament and placed centrally in the building's magnificent entrance hall. The crown is ascribed to Stephen, the king who catholicized Hungary and was proclaimed a saint by the Roman Catholic Church. It is now in the parliament to represent the Hungarian national identity, and more.

"At the ceremony on Jan. 1, spiritual powers were evoked when Minister of Justice Ibolya David, a devoted Catholic, said in her speech that the 'radiation of St. Stephen's crown' will surely guide and support the work of the parliamentarians," Hack told Charisma.

Németh points out that the primary hindrance to revival in Europe is the traditional church-state alliance and the ideology the alliance propagates. Conservative political parties cooperate with the historical churches and lobby for

new laws within the European Union that distinguish between “constitutional churches” and “cults.”

Németh explains that Pentecostal and charismatic churches are portrayed “as hired by the Jews, as alien to the nation, as instruments of U.S. politics and even as anti-Christian.”

“This is our greatest challenge,” he says. “We should avoid open confrontation at this point, but seek to inform legislators on both the national and the European Union levels.”

Németh also notes that militant nationalism, ethnic intolerance, in general, and anti-Semitism, in particular, are an ongoing part of the church-state ideology, saying that believers in the country should not expect the situation to change anytime soon.

In spite of these developments Faith Church will stick by the policy Németh employed even during the days of communist rule—to always live as if there were freedom of religion.