

Breakthrough in Budapest

A revival in Hungary has made one charismatic congregation the largest and fastest-growing church in Europe.

It is 9:30 a.m. Sunday morning on the doorstep of Faith Church in Budapest, Hungary. Today's service, like every Sunday's, will start at 10 a.m. No special event is planned—there is no guest speaker, and no conference is in progress. Today, senior pastor Sándor Németh will preach, and the service promises to be business as usual.

But “business as usual” is precisely why Faith Church represents a miracle within this former communist country, which in the years before 1990 suffered brutal political crackdowns and stiff religious restrictions as a satellite member of the Soviet Union's Eastern bloc nations.

Outside the church, people are arriving and entering the building—not by the dozens—but by the thousands. The parking lot is a sea of activity as busy guards and ushers direct cars and make room for the church's shuttles that bus attendants from the nearest subway station.

By 10:30—half an hour after the service officially begins but before it has started moving in earnest—some 15,000 people have gathered. The main hall is full, the balconies are full, the overflow area is full—and the professional worship band is quickening the beat.

With a regular Sunday attendance of 12,000 to 15,000 people, this charismatic congregation in Hungary's capital city is—by far—the largest in all of Europe. Nationwide, about 40,000 believers gather at 250 separate Faith Church congregations every Sunday, and the numbers are increasing. During one recent month, the Faith Church pastors baptized 400 new converts.

Across Europe, such figures are staggering. Few European churches number more than 1,000 members. For a typical charismatic or evangelical congregation here in Hungary or elsewhere in Europe, the numbers rise no higher than the low hundreds or freeze at several dozen.

For Németh, the unprecedented growth of Faith Church is a mystery because there is “no method, no recipe,” he says, that he consciously has applied to attract the many thousands who attend every week. It is a result of what he calls the “invisible aspect”—the sovereign work of God’s Holy Spirit.

“I always tried to do my job,” he says with a shrug of his shoulders during an interview with Charisma recently in Budapest. But after a thoughtful pause, he adds: “Our growth is miraculous—even to me.”

Healing the People

“Miraculous” is the word—and it is one understood by those whose lives have been changed at Faith Church, such as Olga Kadét, a 50-year-old grandmother from the village of Boldog (Hungarian for “happy”). There is no question in her mind about what God has done for her through Faith Church.

In 1993 Kadét had made up her mind to commit suicide. All hope of a meaningful life had been quenched by the long list of her insurmountable physical problems detailed in her medical record.

At the time, Kadét already had been bound to a wheelchair for 18 months. Four spinal-hernia surgeries had been unsuccessful, and in the end she had been left paralyzed by them. After the fourth operation she could move only her head and hands. Doctors had told her that her chances of getting better were about 1-in-100.

“While I was contemplating how to end my life, it happened that a family in our street accepted the Lord,” Kadét told

Charisma. "I saw them about, and they were radiating with joy."

The family took her to a Faith Church meeting in the nearby city of Hotvan. It was the first time she had attended one of the church's meetings, and Kadét gave her life to Jesus.

"I started attending the weekly Bible studies," she recalls. "After three weeks, there was a teaching on healing based on the story in Mark 5 about the woman who had been subject to bleeding for 12 years. There was no prayer, just teaching.

"Sitting there listening, I saw a vision of Jesus from behind, and myself moving up to touch His garment," she says. "At that very instant I felt something like electricity running through me from the top down, and I knew that I was healed. I got out of my wheelchair and started dancing, and I did not stop for three days!"

On the day before her healing, Kadét had gone—as usual in her wheelchair—to visit her mother in the hospital. When she returned to the hospital after her healing, and the doctors saw her walking—her wheelchair nowhere in sight—they just stared.

"They asked me what had happened to my wheelchair," she says, smiling happily at the recollection. Her own doctors later examined her and declared her 100 percent healthy.

Kadét is only one of many people in the brief history of Faith Church who have received miraculous healings.

Another is Gyula Horváth, 56, a businessman in Esztergom. Because his business is demanding, Horváth likes to keep in shape by playing soccer.

"My doctor tells me I have the heart of a young man," he says proudly.

But five years ago Horváth's life was very different. He could

not climb stairs or lift anything heavy. He was too weak to retain his position as the head of three restaurants and had retired with a disability pension.

Then 51, Horváth suffered from a severe heart condition. His coronary artery was blocked, and both laser therapy and medication had failed to correct the condition. Final preparations had been made at the hospital for him to have an arterial transplant. But Horváth was a member of a Faith Church congregation and believed in the power of prayer.

“On the Sunday before the transplant surgery my pastor prayed for me and anointed me with oil,” Horváth told Charisma. “I got into an ecstatic state. People tell me I was dancing like David, but I did not know it myself.”

When the medical professor who had been treating Horváth for six years examined him the next morning, he became very upset.

“The professor got angry,” Horváth says. “He said my artery had been 75 percent blocked the previous week, and now there was nothing. He shouted at me: ‘Have you gone to the . or to Germany for surgery without telling me!’” Horváth’s condition had been deteriorating for so long that the professor was unwilling to accept the evidence of his own instruments.

“I was taken back to my room,” Horváth continues. “After a while the professor came by, and I was able to tell him that God had healed me. He was an honest Jewish man who feared God, and he believed me. He actually blessed me, and declined to bill me for the final visit.”

Kornél Illés, 34, who pastors the Faith Church congregation in Salgótarján, one of the largest outside Budapest, was not physically healed, but he says God took advantage of his broken leg to bring him to repentance and then into the ministry. The fracture prevented Illés from continuing the karate training that was and had been for years the focus of

his life.

"I was on the beach, swimming with my plastered foot in a plastic bag," he remembers, describing the day in 1989 when his life turned around. "A friend showed up and told me he was about to visit a place where he was 'loved by everyone' and that I should go with him. Karate was out anyway, so I went along."

The Faith Church outreach that he visited with his friend did not change Illés' life at first. He had a hard time believing that the young man dressed in jeans who was preaching was a "proper priest."

Illés says he could sense something meaningful in the young man's sermon on the prodigal son, but he resisted the altar call, thinking it must be a "trick." The pastor resumed preaching and began to name secrets in Illés' life.

"I suspected that he had been talking to a friend about me, and I stonewalled again, but finally he began mentioning things that I had never shared with anybody," Illés said. "Unintentionally I moved forward as if somebody was pushing me! It all felt very abnormal—I was still wearing my beach clothes!"

That night the karate fighter gave his life to Jesus and says he experienced "a complete forgiveness of sin and God's manifest love and presence."

Illés says the Lord spoke to him, saying: "I will change you and make you fit for My service."

Illés immediately set out to reorganize his life. First he brought the girlfriend he had been living with to the next meeting. She surrendered her life to Jesus, and the couple separated for a year, before marrying.

Three years later, in 1992, Illés became a Faith Church pastor

and assumed responsibility for the Salgótarján congregation, which by then had grown to 130 members. Today Sunday attendance fluctuates between 1,000 and 1,500, and Illés also oversees four new churches in the region that are attracting hundreds of people.

Pastor Illés says people are drawn primarily by the supernatural revelation of God's goodness, but also by miracles in which people have been healed of epilepsy and cancer. Many come to church seeking deliverance from poverty because the region has become one of the poorest in Hungary since the fall of communism, after which most of Salgótarján's factories closed down.

"But among our church members there is no unemployment," Illés points out. "Many run businesses, employing others. Thirty families have built homes of their own, and other families have moved to bigger apartments. The way the Lord has blessed me financially—one out of seven brothers and sisters in a working-class family—is a great testimony in the city."

Changing the Nation

From the first beginnings of Faith Church in 1979, when Sándor Németh started meeting with seven people in a Budapest suburb, his work has been completely dependent upon the supernatural guidance and intervention of the Holy Spirit, he says.

Unlike many east European church leaders, Németh has never accepted Western money, and he shakes his head when the subject of Christian speakers from America who offer their services—for exorbitant fees—comes up. He said he is not very interested in what he calls "international spiritual streams."

"Europe is different, and east Europe is different again," he states.

Németh speaks only Hungarian and travels little. The first person he says who influenced his life spiritually was "an

elderly Pentecostal lady in a wheelchair” who prophesied—before Németh was even a Christian—that he would preach to the multitudes. British Bible scholar Derek Prince is one of his longtime friends and, to a degree, an influence.

“I suppose Faith Church has traits of classical Pentecostalism, discipling and the faith stream,” he reflects, “but I do not normally think in such terms.”

Future plans at Faith Church include turning the movement’s attention to the numerous villages across Hungary where they hope to knit together small, independent companies of believers.

“We hear of about 20-30 believers in many small villages,” Németh says, “and we plan to plant new churches all over the country. There are very many 10-year-old Christians in our churches that we intend to train and commission, and we are presently intensifying our training programs for domestic missionaries.”

At the continental European level, Németh is expecting the arrival of a 21st-century revival that will be the result of the “restoration of the apostolic ministry,” he says.

In addition to the “invisible aspect” of the work of the Holy Spirit in his own church, Németh pinpoints two other key components that are fueling the fires of revival at his church and in the others under the Faith Church umbrella.

First, there is the ongoing persecution that has changed—but not ceased—since the fall of European communism and the establishing of democracy in 1989 (see related article on page 94). Second, there is the strong emphasis on transforming people’s political worldview, on both individual and national levels.

“Without a biblical worldview our faith is hollow,” Németh

stresses. "I always preach two to three hours—and I always did—because I want to accustom the believers to living by the Word."

Faith Church runs its own elementary and secondary schools and is in the midst of a dispute with the Hungarian government over the church's request to be licensed to establish a university. Such initiatives are progressive and stand out within European charismatic circles.

Faith Church also publishes the political weekly Hetek. Church members played a critical role in founding one of Hungary's new democratic parties during the 1990s.

Even during the Sunday service in Budapest Németh spends much of his time instilling biblical worldviews into his congregation, while assuring the 15,000 attendees that if they put their trust in God's Word, God will not fail them.

At one point, Németh and Peter Hack—a leading politician in Hungary and an elder in Faith Church—thumb through the latest issue of Hetek together, commenting on current articles and urging congregants to give themselves to changing Hungary.

It is all part of a routine Sunday church gathering at Faith Church, where business as usual is anything but for churches throughout Hungary and across Europe.

Two hours after the 10 a.m. service began, the congregation is just warming up. At 1 p.m., Németh starts preaching. At 2 o'clock he is halfway through his sermon. At 4 p.m. the service ends, and the people show signs of leaving—but not of fatigue.

During the offering Németh paces back and forth with his hands folded on his back. "Critics say that we are forcing you to give financially," he reasons with the crowd. "But the Word says that giving will result in rich blessings, and the freedom of religion includes the freedom to live by the Word."

He keeps talking, like a daddy speaking to his children, correcting and encouraging, turning people's attention away from the secular influences that abound in society.

"When you get home from work, pick up the Bible—not the mobile phone or the remote control for the TV," he exhorts. "These things have power today."

His sermon is a powerful warning against the sexual perversion that is permeating modern Hungary, and possibly more than a thousand church members respond by coming forward to confess their sins and renew their commitment to Christ.

One of Németh's co-pastors says the reason for the exceptional growth of the movement is plain to see.

"The most important factor is Sándor Németh's apostolic ministry," says Peter Lörincz, pastor of the 1,500-strong Faith Church congregation in Pécs in southwest Hungary, who views his own ministry as a continuation of Németh's. In Lörincz's words, Németh's anointing is "efficient in all of Hungary."

It is a description that rings true to Faith Church's impact on the nation. In the Hungarian language, the word for "faith" is hit. And Faith Church, or Hit Church, has been just that—a hit among thousands of spiritually deprived east Europeans who since the atheistic Iron Curtain parted have seen in Németh's ministry the power of a living God at work in the lives of everyday people.

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