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Debate on the Initiatives of the Faculty of Theology in Debrecen. The Theological Education Designed by Sándor Csikesz and Imre Révész²

Abstract.

This study examines the reform initiatives for theological education in the Reformed Church in Hungary during the early 20th century, focusing on the period between 1912 and 1940. Central to this examination are the reform plans developed by Sándor Csikesz and Imre Révész, particularly their 1937 draft aimed at unifying pastoral training. The research contextualizes these reforms within the broader historical and ecclesiastical framework, analysing the efforts and challenges faced by the Faculty of Theology in Debrecen. The study highlights the various debates and controversies sparked by the proposed reforms, particularly the opposition

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² The study was carried out within the framework of the *Challenges and Wayfinding in the History of the Hungarian Reformed Church in the 20th Century* research project (No. 66001R800) of the Church History Research Institute of the Faculty of Theology at Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary.



from other theological academies and the broader church community. Through detailed exploration of historical documents, this paper sheds light on the motivations behind the reforms, the resistance they encountered, and their lasting impact on theological education within the Hungarian Reformed Church.

Keywords: curriculum, Reformed Church in Hungary, theological education, pastoral training, reforms

Backgrounds of the Study

In the second year of my doctoral research, I was mainly concerned with the reform plans for theological education in the Reformed Church in Hungary, specifically focusing on the period between 1881 and 1940, during which the curricular reforms of the five and later four theological academies in Hungary were overseen by the General Convention, more precisely its Educational Committee and the National Conference of Theology Teachers (hereinafter: NCCT). The minimum requirements for the curriculum draft were set by the Convention for each pastoral training institution as early as 1883,³ whereas in the subsequent regulations (1911, 1924, 1930, 1940)⁴ we can find passages on the examination system and the training of the future generation of pastors. The Convention's task was primarily to accept and, so to speak, "take account" of the common framework (which basically drew only the outlines of curriculum), rather than to plan and design it. Their implementation was the responsibility of the maintaining church districts (in practice, the academies themselves), being bound to report annually to the Convention through the General Curriculum Committee. At first, the content and details of the curricula were discussed and elaborated by boards formed of the theology teachers of the pastoral training institutions concerned (chaired by the bishop of a church district), and from 1921 by the NCCT.

³ See: The General Convention Protocol: 16 September 1883, No. 64, 41–46.

⁴ On the subjects, examinations, and educational aspects of the time, see: TÓTH-GYÓLLAI, Dániel: „Anyaszentegyházunk életszükséglete”. *Az egységes lelkészképzés reformjai a magyarországi református egyházban 1883–1940 között*. Budapest, Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem Hittudományi Kar. 18–82. https://htk.kre.hu/images/doc/kiadvanyok/monografia/Anyaszentegyhazunk_eletszukseglete_2023_2.pdf (accessed on: 30 May 2023).

As part of the programme of the research workshop, I have also examined a shorter timeslot of this period, particularly exposed to the challenges and the quest for new paths in our Church, which was defined in terms of pastoral training by the fact that one of the four theological institutions was a faculty. In my study, I would like to present the initiatives of the professors of the faculty in Debrecen aimed at a common pastoral training, especially the 1937 draft by Sándor Csikesz and Imre Révész, as well as to examine their context from the perspective of church history.

Sándor Csikesz and Imre Révész's Reform Agenda

Background, Church Historical Context

The said reform agenda, the outlines of which had already appeared in 1936 at the conference of the National Association of Theological Students in Debrecen, in a lecture by the later rector of the university, Sándor Csikesz⁵ – which is mentioned in several memoirs of Csikesz's life as perhaps the most striking piece of the practical theology teacher's own series of *bold* ideas⁶ – was in fact a joint idea with Imre Révész, the Dean of the Faculty of Theology, which they had been contemplating since the early 1930s.⁷

⁵ See: CSIKESZ, Sándor (1941): Theologiai és egyházi feladatok, melyek megoldása az új lelkésznevezésekre vár. In: Módis, László (ed.): *Csikesz Sándor emlékkönyvek 3.* Debrecen. 167–168. On 20 June 1936 [Sándor Csikesz], at the National Conference of Theologians in Debrecen, in front of an audience of perhaps several hundred young theologians from all parts of Greater Hungary (i.e. before a *qualified* large audience), he outlined the details of this *draft*. RÉVÉSZ, Imre (1942): *Felvilágosító megjegyzések D. Dr. Kovács J. István „A lelkészképzés reformja” c. munkálatához.* Debrecen, Archives of the Transibiscan Reformed Church District II.5.a.4.

⁶ HŐS, Csaba (2019): *Csikesz Sándor lelképásztori eszményképének elemei a lelképásztori munkában és lelkésznevelésben.* Sárospatak, Hernád Kiadó. 62; FEKETE, Károly (2019b): Református teológiai oktatás a Debreceni Egyetem keretein belül 1912–1950. In: Baráth, Béla Levente – Fekete, Károly (eds.): *Őrállóvá tettek. Műhelytanulmányok a debreceni teológiai oktatás és református lelkészképzés 1850–2000 közötti történetéhez.* Debrecen, TTRE–DRHE. 165.

⁷ Both authors gradually presented the draft to the ecclesiastical public in lectures, studies, and essays. See Révész's own list in: RÉVÉSZ 1942, 2; CSIKESZ, Sándor [year missing]: *A magyar református teológiai képzés egységes rendszere.* TrREL I.26.2. 1–5; CSIKESZ 1941, 167–168.

From Révész's 1942 memoirs, we know⁸ that together with Sándor Csikesz they approached László Ravasz in November 1937 to ask the pastoral president of the Convention for his opinion on their plan, which they communicated in detail to the other members of the faculty of theology, winning their approval.

After the discussion, Ravasz asked the two theology teachers to prepare a memo of what had been said in the face-to-face conversation, for the sole purpose of making it easier for him to recall its contents in his later confidential discussions. "He stated he considered the ideas raised to be of much more serious and far-reaching importance than he had been prepared to take a stand on them and commit himself in any direction in advance"⁹ and that further action on the plan should be taken by the presidencies of the church districts,¹⁰ making it pending on the opinion of the lay President of the Convention, Jenő Balogh.¹¹

⁸ The only detailed description I have found is in this manuscript.

⁹ The translations of all, originally non-English quotations belong to Augusta Szász. See: RÉVÉSZ 1942, 1.

¹⁰ The archival documents speak about the later negotiations only indirectly. A copy of the memorandum prepared by Csikesz and Co. was sent by Chief Elder Jenő Balogh to the bishops of the church districts in a letter at the end of January 1938 with the following text: "The Rector and Dean of the Faculty of Theology of the Hungarian Royal István Tisza University of Debrecen, Hungary, submitted as an informal proposal a memorandum on the reorganization and unification of pastoral training. We have the honour to send you a copy of this work for your kind consideration, noting that we understand that this matter may be discussed at the following national conference of theology teachers. Please accept, Your Excellency, the assurance of our highest consideration." Synod Archives 2.d.66.d., 7630/1937. The letter draft can be read in the online collection, too: TÓTH-GYÓLLAI: *Anyaszentegyházunk*, 618.

¹¹ Among the letters in the Synod Archives, there is one from Ravasz to Jenő Balogh, which shows that the draft was probably discussed in person by the two before being presented to the bishops. The letters sent later were signed by Balogh alone, so we can assume that the chief elder was responsible for the further settlement of the matter based on an agreement between them. "This memorandum was handed over by the Rector and Dean of the Faculty of Theology of the University of Debrecen, professors Sándor Csikesz and Imre Révész, following a preliminary discussion. Please be so kind as to read it. With your kind permission, we should discuss the matter before its contents are made known to anyone." The letter is available in the online collection, too: TÓTH-GYÓLLAI: *Anyaszentegyházunk*, 619.

But, while these confidential discussions were still underway, all three theological academies had learned from different sources and had formed an opinion on the basic concepts of the draft by March 1938. The shadows of the later “catastrophe also rose”,¹² and thus the professors in Debrecen put aside their more far-sighted ideas, saying that “the public opinion of a Hungarian Reformed Church in the throes of a world catastrophe is not a suitable environment for a calm and productive discussion.”¹³

Despite the war, the debate on the draft did take place – and under rather unfortunate circumstances, as a few days before the February session of the NCCT, which drafted the final proposal for the 1940 curriculum, Béla Vasady, a theology professor in Debrecen, published his colleagues’ reform ideas in a study on the past and present of pastoral education, with the consent and support of Révész and Csikesz.¹⁴ “The material published at an inconvenient time”¹⁵ already stirred great opposition at the conference, and in 1941, on behalf of the academies of Pápa, Sárospatak, and Budapest, Theology Professor István J. Kováts of Budapest¹⁶ replied in a 64-page-long discussion paper to Béla Vasady’s 49-page study subsequent to the adoption of the curriculum reform and the extension of the training to five years.¹⁷

¹² RÉVÉSZ 1942, 1.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Vasady’s study was written in December 1939, and first published in seven consecutive issues of the magazine *Lelkészegyesület*, which he edited at the time (the last issue of 1939 and the first six of 1940). The final part of the work was published after the conference of theology teachers held in Pápa on 2–3 February 1940, and thus after the closure of the matter (by theology teachers) concerning the future of pastoral training. Nevertheless, Kováts’s criticism is justified since the conference had already received its mandate for curricular reform on 20 April 1939, and the date of the February conference was known well in advance to the guests. The timing of Vasady’s study can therefore be interpreted without malice as creating ‘unnecessary anxiety’, as we read in the introduction to István J. Kováts’s discussion paper.

¹⁵ KOVÁTS, J. István (1941): *A lelkészképzés reformja. Válasz Vasady Béla dr. hasonló című tanulmányára*. Budapest, Bethlen Gábor Irodalmi és Nyomdai Részvénytársaság. 3.

¹⁶ For his life see: KÖBEL, Szilvia (2021): Egy élet prédikációja: Kováts J. István (1880-1965) portréja. In: Petrás, Éva (ed.): *A 20. századi magyar protestáns közéletiség arcképcsarnoka*. Budapest, Gondolat – Barankovics Alapítvány. 83–110.

¹⁷ Kováts, as he himself writes, willingly undertook the task of summarizing the comments of the three academies of theology in a discussion paper, on condition that “we wait until the

Kováts's article summarizes all the faulty aspirations that he sees in Vasady's work related to the transformation of the theological academic training in Debrecen into a faculty of theology, and it considers the Csikesz–Révész plan as presented by their colleague a harmful idea in every respect as well as dangerous to the Church as a whole.¹⁸ The truly inconvenient time for debate does not even bring the possibility of consensus. In January 1942, at an extraordinary meeting of the Faculty of Theology in Debrecen, Kováts's paper was discussed, being considered unfair and misleading,¹⁹ and Révész himself wrote a confidential manuscript about his disappointed reflections, which he concluded as follows:

But those who, even now, thirty years later, find it necessary to raise the reproachful voice about the Transibiscan district and Debrecen on that certain transfer (by which many understand a sale!) should first examine themselves and the attitude of the church region they represented and feared: do they have a historical and perhaps other kind of right to this reproach? To love, fear, and protect our own: a human right and duty. To recognize our own in others with the eyes of love and to fear and protect them as our own: a Christian virtue. I. Cor. 12:12, 26, 27. This is my last word on this matter for the foreseeable future.²⁰

Description of the Draft

In the following, after a brief introduction to this reform proposal giving rise to major controversies and no small disagreement, we will discuss two major issues that appeared in connection with it, based on István J. Kováts's and Béla Vasady's works.

question is resolved in the Convention and the work on our theologies starts according to the new curriculum so that the professors of the academies of theology may not be remotely accused of responding to the draft spread by Vasady only because they feel their very existence is threatened." KOVÁTS 1941, 4–5.

¹⁸ Op. cit. 4.

¹⁹ "[Kováts] is essentially directed against the existence of the Faculty of Theology under the University of Debrecen." See: DE HTK 1941/Protocol 42, 31 January 1942. 7th Extraordinary Session, no. 249.

²⁰ RÉVÉSZ 1942, 3.

The closest text that remained accessible regarding the oral accounts on the content of the Csikesz–Révész plan is a copy of a 5-page memorandum to László Ravasz, as an unofficial, unsigned, and undated manuscript.²¹

The authors start their memorandum with the following questions: “How could the nationally universal significance and vocation of the Faculty of Reformed Theology in the Hungarian Reformed pastoral education be asserted as effectively as possible for the benefit of the Hungarian Reformed Church? [...] How can a healthy and reasonable cooperation be established between the faculty and the theological academies of the Hungarian Reformed Church?”²²

The answers to their questions are first based on the following points: 1) The Faculty of Theology in Debrecen has state-funded infrastructural facilities that the other three theological schools will not have in the foreseeable future due to lack of financial resources. 2) Insufficient resources in the three academies mean that some department positions are permanently vacant. 3) In Debrecen, non-theological subjects are taught to the highest standard by academic staff from other faculties, while the academies struggle with delivering them. 4) The academies – due to the smaller number of theologians and the sacrifices of the church districts – are much more intimate, and thus more suitable for emphasizing the important educational aspect of pastoral training, while in the case of the Debrecen faculty none of these factors are applicable, and thus “the relation of the Transtibiscan district, i.e. of the absolute majority of Hungarian Reformed Churches, to the issue of pastoral training is not sealed with so many sacrifices...”²³ 5) A radical change in church policy could entail the dissolution of the Faculty of Theology, which would mean that the universal Church would have to bear the burden of maintaining all four academies of theology, which would be worsened by the possible lack of state aid to the church and schools.

²¹ A 5-page typed document with handwritten corrections – see: ZsL 2.d.66.d. 2643/1937. The Memorandum is also available online: TÓTH-GYÓLLAI: *Anyaszentegyházunk*, 620–624. The manuscript is hereafter referred to with its own page numbering, the authorship of Csikesz and Révész, and the title *Memorandum*.

²² Csikesz–Révész: *Memorandum*, 1.

²³ Op. cit. 2.

The authors' response emerging from the above points is that in order to eliminate this great waste of resources and "shape the spiritual unity, the common confessional spirit, the social and possibly political behaviour of the Hungarian Reformed Church",²⁴ the "pastoral training of the universal Church should also be unified", and the faculty of Debrecen and the three theological academies should be involved in it according to a unified programme, with an appropriate division of labour.

The details of their perspective in this sense are: *All and any future pastors of the Hungarian Reformed Church...*

1. ...would begin their studies in Pápa in a preparatory year,²⁵ which has long been declared necessary, where they would study the Hungarian Bible, the creeds, hymn books, biblical languages and Latin.
2. Then they would go to Debrecen for four years of academic training.
3. Then, instead of serving as curates, they would go to Sárospatak and Budapest for one year each, where they would first learn about the problems of rural and small-town congregations, then the institutional life of big-city congregations and the universal Church, and receive practical training in this sense.

After presenting the framework, Csikesz and Révész summarize the values of their agenda as follows:

²⁴ Op. cit. 3.

²⁵ The Convention finally introduced the first preparatory year into the 1940 curriculum and the qualifying examination at the end of it, but before that, the introduction of the practice of German and French Protestant pastoral training model had been repeatedly discussed since the 1920s. See, among others: *Lelkészképzésünk reformja. A theol. tanárok konferenciájának memorandumuma*, 1921, 2, ZsL 2.d.66.d. The memorandum is also available in the online collection: TÓTH-GYÓLLAI: *Anyaszentegyházunk*, 399–403; TÖRÖK, István: Munkálat a konventi jegyzőkönyv 91/1933. sz. határozata tárgyában. In: *A pápai ref. theol. akad. tanári kar 1933. november 21-én tartott rendes ülésének jegyzőkönyve*, no 3, point 15, par. 2. The draft is also available in the online collection: TÓTH-GYÓLLAI: *Anyaszentegyházunk*, 578–582; the outline submitted by the Academy of Reformed Theology of Sárospatak on the matter of the curriculum reform, 1938, 3–4, ZsL 2.d.66.d. The draft is also available in the online collection: TÓTH-GYÓLLAI: *Anyaszentegyházunk*, 636–641.

The Hungarian Reformed pastoral education would be brought under unified and universal church control much more than it is possible under the current system without losing the advantages given by the relationship with the state. It is worth reflecting on what the creation of a unified Hungarian Reformed pastoral morale would mean if the possibility of a regular change of location for all the theology students of the Hungarian Reformed Church during their theology years could become a reality, and, on the other hand, by their legations, they could become acquainted with the whole face and every historical landscape of the Hungarian Reformed Church and to form a unified spiritual body during these seven years, the like of which has never been seen before in the history of the Hungarian Reformed Church. But perhaps it is not an exaggerated prescience to say that there have never been times in the history of the Hungarian Reformed Church when such a unified pastoral body was needed as it will be needed in the future.²⁶

The time had not come for the implementation of this undoubtedly revolutionary and tempting project – perceived as such mostly by its supporters in Debrecen – and neither had it come for its discussion when its content with Béla Vasady’s own additions, pro and con arguments, biased and enthusiastic statements, was published as part of his study (or rather as its core).²⁷

Some of the angry criticisms in István J. Kováts’s article were due to this ill-chosen time, others perhaps to Vasady, and a third part was probably aimed at the pathfinding endeavour of the theology professors in Debrecen, which was becoming increasingly burdensome for the Church.

The Theological Education in Debrecen Seeking for a Path

The Faculty of Theology and Pastoral Education

It is already clear from the Csikesz–Révész memorandum that this draft did not become so important for the professors in Debrecen only from the point of view of the

²⁶ Op. cit. 4.

²⁷ In this connection, we can read Kováts’s blunt opinion: “We cannot conceal the impression, which became stronger and stronger as we read the study that the whole thing was written to defend and spread this draft.” KOVÁTS 1941, 9.

universal ecclesiastical interest. On the one hand, Kováts accuses Vasady of being inclined to propagate such a biased plan towards Debrecen because, unlike the relatively slow decrease in the number of students at the three academies, the faculty in Debrecen faced rapid depopulation (between 1933 and 1940, the number of students was more than halved).²⁸ However, perhaps more significant than this circumstance at the time of the draft's inception was the evolving situation in Debrecen's pastoral training upon its transformation into a university. This included the absence of a specific church affiliation, educational support, and a close integration with church-related activities.

As early as 1913, the Transtibiscan Reformed Church District discussed the possibility of establishing a separate, church-managed institute focused on pastoral education alongside the faculty. Ferenc Kiss, who was later entrusted by the district with the organization and management of the said institute, stated in his inaugural address that the Faculty of Theology of the State University of Debrecen cannot be assigned the practical training of future pastors but rather only the teaching of theoretical knowledge. The Institute for Pastoral Education²⁹ established by the church district “to conduct pastoral training within its own competence for the purposes of the Church”³⁰ states in its regulations³¹ that any student of the faculty of theology may be admitted to pastoral studies only if he has been a member of the Institute at the same time as was pursuing his studies. The dual training was far beyond the capacity of the average theological student, especially in the period after 1932 when the university classes were held in the central building in Nagyerdő and the afternoon classes of the boarding school and the pastoral education in the College, the two being at a minimum of 30-minute walk away from each other.³²

²⁸ See *Appendix 1*.

²⁹ On its history, see: FEKETE, Károly (2019a): A Lelkészképző Intézet. In: Baráth, Béla Levente – Fekete, Károly (eds.): *Őrállóvá tettek. Műhelytanulmányok a debreceni teológiai oktatás és református lelkészképzés 1850–2000 közötti történetéhez*. Debrecen, TTRE – DRHE. 195–227; CSOHÁNY, János (1988): A korszakváltások évszázada (1849–1950). In: Kocsis, Elemér (ed.): *A Debreceni Református Kollégium története*. Budapest, MRE Zsinati Iroda Sajtóosztálya. 255–258.

³⁰ KOVÁTS 1941, 45.

³¹ Regulations of the Higher Educational Institute of the Reformed College of Debrecen. Proposal, 1914, *Lelkészegyesület* 11(1918), 390.

³² CSOHÁNY 1988, 256.

The idea of extending theological education to five years, which can also be attributed to Csikesz and Révész (and the then Director of the Institute, Károly Erdős), is also closely connected to the case of the Debrecen Institute for Pastoral Education.³³ Commissioned by the General Assembly of the Transibiscan Reformed Church District, the proposal submitted to the General Convention by Sándor Csikesz puts forward the introduction of a 12-month course for curates who have passed the first pastoral qualifying examination, which would be compulsory and a requirement for service in congregation. The course would have been hosted by two pastoral-training institutes, one in Budapest (for graduates from Pápa and Budapest, sponsored by the two districts and the Budapest congregation) and the other in Debrecen (for graduates from Sárospatak and Debrecen, sponsored by the two church districts and the Debrecen congregation). According to the arguments of the three-member committee, these two locations are suitable because of (1) the theological boarding school, which is spacious enough to provide a common management and control, (2) the wide field of missionary work and the already existing organizations and deaconess-training institutions, (3) the universities and other cultural institutions. The draft also proposes a detailed curriculum for the fifth year, interspersed with various pastoral exercises (some examples: agriculture, government and administration, church arts, the life of the pastor, history of the church districts, visiting internships). The initiative, which came up again every year at the Convention between 1925 and 1930, was repeatedly rejected by all three church districts except the Transibiscan district, for financial reasons. And although this draft became a pioneer for the basic concept of the later 1940 curriculum reform,³⁴ it would

³³ Cf.: Minutes of the committee sent alongside Resolution no. TtRE 390/Nov. 1923, 3 April 1924, No. 4, 3–4; Church District Protocol, 9 June 1925, No. 68, 50–54.

³⁴ In 1933, János Marton (then the theological rapporteur of NCCT and of the Convention's Committee on Universal Curriculum) recalls the importance of the Transibiscan Plan as a historical memory, when, in fulfilment of the mandate received in Resolution No. 5 of the Conference of Theology Teachers at its meeting of 3 February 1933, he submitted a memo to the Convention on the reform of the theological curriculum and collected historical arguments for transforming the training into a 5-year programme: "The proposals put forward by the Transibiscan Reformed Church District clearly show that the curriculum reform of 1924 did not meet all legitimate requirements." In 1933, the Convention declares its commitment to the five-year programme and invites the Conference of Theology Teachers

still be difficult to separate the original idea from Debrecen's desire to provide in some way a well-sustainable training for its students, closely linked to the life of the whole of the Church. At the end of his study published in 1941, Kováts is sharply vocal in his conclusions drawn from similar observations:

Finally, it cannot be denied that the Transtibiscan church district, freed from the burden of pastoral training, had for many years listed its pastoral training institute only on paper, which was supposed to complement the work of the theological faculty in a practical and spiritual educational direction, until now it has filled a chair, but it has still not created a separate theological boarding school, which it should have created even without the common pastoral training, and which it planned for the 400th anniversary of the college.³⁵

Tensions between Church and State

We can also notice the contradictory nature of the statement in the Csikesz–Révész memorandum, namely that, if the plan were implemented, pastoral education would be more under universal church control than before. While it is possible that Csikesz and Révész were discussing an ideal scenario and intended to elaborate on the details of its implementation in a calm discussion, the 23 years of operation of the Debrecen faculty had not necessarily validated their assertion thus far.

The founding document of the university and the article of the law establishing the university already set clear limits on the extent of church control,³⁶ which consisted only in the fact that the Transtibiscan Reformed Church District had a certain right (actually a veto) in the qualification of candidates for the teaching positions on the

to draft a curriculum. MARTON, János (1933): A theologiai képzési idő öt évre emelése a református theologiai akadémiákon. TTOK előterjesztés. In: *Church District Protocol*. 3 May 1933, No. 90, Annex 3, 364. The study is also available in an online collection: TÓTH-GYÓLLAI: *Anyaszentegyházunk*, 570–577.

³⁵ KOVÁTS 1941, 25.

³⁶ See: Church District Protocol, 16 April 1912, No. 105; Church District Protocol, 15 May 1914, No. 124.

one hand, and the ordination examinations could still be undertaken by the pastoral qualification committee of the Transibiscan Reformed Church District on the other.

The Convention of 1912, in the light of this future framework, states in Resolution 105 that: “[The General Convention] strongly regrets that by this fact the leadership of one of the strongest institutions of Hungarian Reformed higher education is falling out of the hands of the Reformed Church.” In the same Resolution, the Convention agreed to the petition of the Transibiscan district and at the same time took the initiative to discuss and monitor the impact of the case on other pastoral training institutions. Two years later, a six-member committee is appointed, chaired by Bishop Dezső Baltazár, to make a proposal on the matter. The drafter of the document is Károly Nagy, Professor at the Faculty of Theology in Kolozsvár/Cluj, the Chief Registrar of the Church District of Transylvania, who begins his 4-page work with an examination of the political significance of the formation of the University of Debrecen within the church and state education policy. He recognizes the positive effects of this joint step for both sides but at the same time is very clear about the possible dangers it may entail in the future, which would be unforeseeable at the time:

...but the time must come when [the state] will directly demand, at least in return for and as a condition of its financial support, that the pastors of all religions and denominations to whom it entrusts the religious and moral leadership of a part of its citizens should form their own world and life views under the influence of the culture and especially of the scientific life of the time so that the clergy, regardless of the denomination, may be a serious cultural factor in national progress and not a hindrance to it.³⁷

Moreover, Nagy devotes most of his petition to discussing the impact of the establishment of the university on theological higher education and the future of pastoral training in the universal Church,³⁸ and his position is very similar to that proposed by Csikesz and

³⁷ NAGY, Károly (1915): Előterjesztés a lelkészképzés és nevelés tárgyában. In: *Church District Protocol*, 29 May 1915, Annex 19 to the Resolution of the Convention No. 160/1915, 489; also published in: *Dunántúli Protestáns Lap*, 26(1915), 18. 141–143. The text is also available in the online collection at: TÓTH-GYÓLLAI: *Anyaszentegyházunk*, 392–396.

³⁸ Nagy sees the foundation of the University of Debrecen as a turning point for Reformed higher education.

Révész. He sets up his thesis by emphasizing one of the main issues of pastoral education (the impoverishment of the academic climate):³⁹ “Ennobling competition can only take place between equals” since “competition between those of different rank and power makes the stronger one despised and cynical and the weaker one insidious and deceitful.”⁴⁰ The solution he suggests to the existing problem is: “There is only one way to eliminate the disadvantages of unequal competition: by discontinuing the activity of the academies and organizing competition between different theological faculties – with the parallel competition of departments – in the existing single university faculty.”⁴¹ It is not surprising that Kováts also refers back to this much earlier work in his discussion paper:

Thank God, the prediction of the Convention Committee’s document on the academies withering away and becoming inferior did not come true. The committee’s rapporteur, Károly Nagy, who had the heavy burden of the Transylvanian bishopric at a sad time of separation from us, visited Budapest several times to treat his serious illness. We met him several times at the theological seminary. The ailing bishop, awaiting his end with true Christian patience, spoke to us several times in a tender and humble voice about how much he had erred in the past and how God had made him see differently. These were among the views he expressed as rapporteur to the committee... What would have become of the Transylvanian Reformed Church and of the Hungarians in Transylvania during the difficult decades of oppression if the theology of Kolozsvár [now Cluj] had been merged into the only university before the collapse!⁴²

³⁹ “Our former university colleges, over time and amidst the ever-increasing vicissitudes of circumstances, have more or less fallen out of the role of being equal peers in the world’s scientific progress. They have been gradually, and for the most part, reduced to the role of vocational schools or rural academies. These institutions have become second-rate scientific institutes, where the scientific atmosphere, with the exception of a few privileged individuals and epochs, has grown poorer due to their isolation from contact with other scientific disciplines. Without competition, they have secured for themselves the monopolistic prerogatives of their own narrow circle.” NAGY 1915, 489.

⁴⁰ Op. cit. 490.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² KOVÁTS 1941, 63.

In any case, the proposal had a considerable echo in the church journals of the time: the *Dunántúli Protestáns Lap* republished it in full, László Ravasz wrote its review in *Protestáns Szemle*,⁴³ and József Pongrácz elaborated it in *Dunántúli Protestáns Lapok*.⁴⁴ However, the Convention and the Universal Doctrinal Commission did not consider the contents of the document to be timely and made their decision subject to a 4-5-year impact study on the Faculty of Theology in Debrecen. Reality proved the right of the caution of the Convention because as soon as the university had opened, the reports on the annual operation of the theological institutes ceased to include the report of the faculty in Debrecen for years, and when the Convention repeatedly requested the Transibiscan Reformed Church District to allow it to exercise its right of supervision granted by the Church Act over the pastoral education in Debrecen, the Transibiscan Reformed Church District asked the Minister to instruct the Faculty to report to the Convention on the education of theologians. The Minister of Religious Affairs replied that he could not instruct the Faculty of Theology under the University of Debrecen to report to a *third party authority* on the theological education provided by the Faculty. In response, the church district was forced to instruct the Director of the Institute for Pastoral Training to draft the necessary report.

Moreover, the professors of the Faculty of Theology in Debrecen did not participate in the theology teachers' conferences for quite some time, and according to Kováts, "even when they did attend, they repeatedly stated that the decisions of our church were not binding on them."⁴⁵ The implementation of curricular reforms, which fell in the competence of the General Convention, was not fully feasible for the Faculty of Theology. In the case of the 1940 curricular reform, for example, the Institute for Pastoral Training made the following statement:

The teaching staff in theology [...] is in favour of the introduction of five years of theological education as soon as possible. It has not, however, developed a curriculum because this faculty has to follow the curriculum of the university, which is in itself

⁴³ RAVASZ, László (1916): Erdély. In: *Protestáns Szemle*. 28, 7–8. 484–485.

⁴⁴ PONGRÁCZ, József (1916): A theologiai internátusról I., III. In: *Dunántúli Protestáns Lapok*. 28, 43. 346; 28, 45. 361.

⁴⁵ KOVÁTS 1941, 46.

redundant compared to the curriculum and syllabus of the theological academies. It is the position of our faculty, therefore, that what the General Convention will pin down in the five-year curriculum will be accepted as a minimum requirement, but otherwise, by the nature of things, it will retain the university curriculum.⁴⁶

It is worth noting, however – as mentioned by several Debrecen church historians who have written about the history of the college of the period⁴⁷ –, that the idea of the Protestant University of Debrecen long preceded the idea of the University of Debrecen.⁴⁸ Imre Révész wrote about it in his 1942 memorandum, quoted below:

⁴⁶ Institute for Pastoral Training of the Transtibiscan Reformed Church District, Resolution 51/1938–39, 27 December 1938, ZsL 2.d.66.d. 8450/1938.

⁴⁷ CSOHÁNY 1988, 249–252; FEKETE 2019, 117–128; FEKETE, Károly (2007): Adalékok a Debreceni Egyetem „református” jellegének megragadásához. In: Brezsnaynszky, László (ed.): *A „Debreceni Iskola” Neveléstudománytörténeti vázolata*. Budapest. 376–398; SZENTPÉTERI KUN, Béla (1941): *Az egyetem alakulás története: a Kollégiummal való kapcsolatok továbbélése az egyetemnek mint egységnek életében*. Debrecen.

⁴⁸ As a background, it is worth mentioning the Synod of 1891/92, which also focused on the major topic of the establishment of a Protestant theological faculty and the discussion of the idea of a Protestant university. See Synodal documents: Report of Synodal Commission 15 on the two faculties, 25 November 1892. In: *Protestáns Egyházi és Iskolai Lap* 35(1892/53), 804–805; 35(1892/54), 827. In the years preceding its foundation, *Protestáns Egyházi és Iskolai Lap* published a series of studies on the Protestant university: PUBLICANUS (1892): *Protestáns egyetem*. In: *PEIL*. 35, 21. 289–292; SZÖTS, Farkas (1894): *Egyesült protestáns állami theologiai fakultás*. In: *PEIL*. 37, 50. 785–787; ZSOLDOS, Benő (1896): *Theologusaink és az egyetem*. In: *PEIL*. 39, 21. 323–324; SZÖTS, Farkas (1897): *Felső oktatásunk reformjához*. In: *PEIL*. 40, 10. 145–147; SZABÓ, Aladár (1901): *A lelkészképzésről II*. In: *PEIL*. 44, 19. 289–292; RAFFAY, Sándor (1904): *Néhány szó a lelkészképzésről*. In: *PEIL*. 47, 25. 389–90; OBJEKTIV: *A lekipásztori hivatal és az arra való képzés IV*. 49(1906/39), 610–613; VERESS, Jenő (1908): *A lekipásztör-képzés reformja I–II*. In: *PEIL*. 51, 48. 759–760; 49. 775–778; VERESS, Jenő (1911): *A prot. theol. fakultás körül*. In: *PEIL*. 54, 24. 387–389. Farkas Szöts’s following studies also deal with the subject: SZÖTS, Farkas (1900a): *Egyetemi protestáns theologiai fakultás*. In: *Protestáns Szemle*. 12, 5. 313–324; SZÖTS, Farkas (1900b): *Protestánsok egyházi tömörülése I–II*. In: *Protestáns Szemle*. 12, 9–10. 538–549, 617–632.

Before the idea of the establishment of a state university in Debrecen had even arisen, for many decades in the last third of the past century and at the beginning of our century there was planning, action, and large-scale sacrifice in favour of a national Protestant or Reformed university to be established in Debrecen with the appropriate construction, development, and refurbishment of the College. And the failure of this great plan [...] was due to no other reason than the open or veiled jealousy of the other Reformed and Evangelical districts, their reluctance to sacrifices, and the unhealthy outgrowths of particularism that became apparent even then.⁴⁹

Thus, the idea of the University of Debrecen and the Faculty of Reformed Theology was not such a loaded idea a few decades earlier as one might assume from reading István J. Kováts's discussion paper. As a simple example, we can take Kováts, thirty years younger, who was studying in Edinburgh, and reading the minutes of the lengthy negotiations on the Hungarian public education budget (at a time of inter-denominational battles), put pen to paper and sent an editorial to *Protestáns Egyházi és Iskolai Lap* titled *Protestáns theologiai fakultást!* (For a Protestant Theological Faculty!), in which he commented on the issue:

It is precisely for this reason that we not only raise our voices in the strongest terms against the theological faculty of the third Hungarian university becoming Roman Catholic, but [...] we strongly request, even demand, that the faculty of theology of the third university become Protestant! Taking the national aspect into account, Kosice has been pushed into the background, Bratislava falls away, and only Debrecen and Szeged can be considered. And the question of the faculty of theology of the third Hungarian university definitely gives priority to Debrecen.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ RÉVÉSZ 1942, 3.

⁵⁰ KOVÁTS, J. István (1907): *Protestáns theologiai fakultást!* In: *Protestáns Egyházi és Iskolai Lap*. 50, 6. 84–86; 50, 7. 103.

Summary

Sándor Csikesz and Imre Révész's project, which in many respects is of interest to Debrecen, but which nevertheless aims at the benefit of the universal Church and the highest and best quality of pastoral education, still has many questions that deserve to be discussed in conditions suitable for debate. Both the arguments put forward in favour of their draft and the criticisms levelled at them contain elements worth reflecting on in the context of pastoral training in our Church today. The heated debate over the reform ideas reveals that Sándor Csikesz, Imre Révész, István J. Kováts, and Béla Vasady, and similarly the theology faculty staff in Debrecen, Budapest, Sárospatak, and Pápa, all felt the pressing need to find a solution to the following issues: the training of pastors should be the joint responsibility of the Church (shared among church districts, church counties, and congregations) financially, spiritually, and intellectually alike; the particularity of each training location should be emphasized as much as possible; it was necessary to reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of theological training at the faculties within the university, especially from the perspective of the church–state relationship; the Church's responsibility to provide the highest-quality academic and spiritual education and training for its undergraduates.

And although the combination of many historical, ecclesiastical, and personal circumstances, as well as the sharply different conclusions drawn from individual experiences, have hindered a full consensus on pastoral training in our Church in these extraordinary times, the debaters' enthusiasm, courage, honesty, and commitment to the Church can stand as an example for those focusing on pastoral education today.

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Appendix 1. Comparative table covering the number of students

	Sárospatak					Budapest				
	I	II	III	IV	Total	I	II	III	IV	Total
1937	13	15	13	14	56	I only found data on the total number of classes.				79
1938	16	17	19	19	72					69
1939	8	14	14	20	56					69
1940	10	8	14	14	43					62
	Pápa					Debrecen				
	I	II	III	IV	Total	I	II	III	IV	Total
1937	8	10	9	14	40	35	44	36	44	157
1938	18	12	13	15	54	28	41	40	41	146
1939	8	18	13	12	52	15	21	39	38	119
1940	6	12	18	13	44	12	17	23	41	93