

Bishops and rural deans/seniors—Where does the Hungarian Reformed hierarchy come from?

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English translation

Published: September 14, 2026

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Abstract. Amid yet another episcopal election, it is worth asking the uncomfortable question: how truly Reformed is the hierarchical way of functioning in the Reformed Church in Hungary? How did such strong episcopal and deanly power emerge alongside the Reformed self-understanding, and what historical reflexes continue to sustain this system today? The history of the 16th-century superintendents and deans raises surprisingly familiar questions about leadership, authority, obedience, and about how much room remains in the church for bottom-up initiatives.

Keywords: Reformed episcopal election; Reformed church polity; episcopal system; ecclesiastical hierarchy; synod-presbyterial system; Reformed church history; rural dean; superintendent

A rare peculiarity of the Reformed Church in Hungary is its episcopal, hierarchical church structure.¹ The idea recurs again and again that it might be worthwhile to review and possibly reform this structure, which is by far not typically Reformed. But how did we arrive at a situation in which we are almost the only Reformed church in the world with an episcopal system? And is the problem confined solely to the office

¹A magyar reformátusokon kívül egyedül a rendkívül kis létszámú lengyel reformátusoknak van püspöke. A lengyel reformátusok szabályzata: WSTĘP letöltés dátuma: 2026. 09. 13. Erről lásd: Kazimierz BEM: Calvinism in the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth 1548-1648: The Churches and the Faithful. Brill, 2020. passim. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004424821>

of bishop? Might it not be that the structure, indeed our entire outlook, contains elements that stand in need of review, or at least of reconsidering it together?

At the beginning of the Reformation, and indeed almost throughout the entire 16th century, society only very slowly became conscious of the fact of the church schism and the emergence of new denominations. The institutionalization of the Hungarian Reformed Church began during the 1560s, yet many still hoped that the Reformers would be able to transform the Roman Church as it was. Of course, this way of thinking also influenced attitudes toward the church's institutional structure. Thus, on numerous occasions, even among those who already regarded themselves as representatives of the Reformation, many accepted the salary that came from the relevant bishopric, as in the case of Gáspár Károli, who received the octava.² This also meant that although these pastors consciously joined the Helvetic (Calvinist) direction by accepting Reformation teachings, in practice they did not call into question the existence of the bishop and, consequently, of the episcopal organization.

Clearly, the persistence of this uncertainty regarding hierarchy was also aided by the fact that, despite the increasingly intense Lutheran–Helvetic doctrinal disputes from the 1560s onward, it remained difficult in many places to distinguish clearly between those following Luther and those adhering to the Swiss (Reformed) direction. This can be seen in the cases of Mátyás Dévai Bíró or István Szegedi Kis. On the one hand, uncertainty surrounded whether to remain within the medieval church structure or to break away from it; on the other hand, even the two Protestant denominations that became most significant in Hungary had not yet fully separated, and their conflicts centered primarily on doctrinal articles rather than on institutional hierarchy. At the same time, amid the ongoing theological disputes, the “lower clergy” also felt a need for the protection and support of a “strong man.” This self-defensive reflex was present even among the citizens of Geneva, which is precisely why they asked Calvin, whom they had previously expelled from their city, to return.

Those living in the Kingdom of Hungary, which had been divided into three parts, experienced different levels of threat—more so than other European nations who had come under the influence of the Reformation. It is therefore no surprise that the clergy was also seeking some form of protection, which they found in organizing themselves and in the development of a hierarchy. What is more, Hungarians had still preserved medieval structures that, compared to conditions in Western Europe, were considerably more stable.

One additional reason for the election of bishops may have been the need to ensure a supply of clergy and to have someone to ordain pastors. In the cases of Mihály Sztárai and István Szegedi Kis, we see that the appearance of the superintendent³ is linked to the ordination of ministers. Moreover, the creation of territorial units for the new churches and the convening of synods also depended on the or-

²Az octava a papok fizetése volt, amit a befizetett tizedből visszaosztott nekik az illetékes egyházmegye. Ez esetben a nyolcadát, de lehetett több vagy kevesebb is.

³A püspök megnevezése.

ganizational abilities of certain “authoritative figures.” In the Tiszáninneni (Upper Tisza) Reformed Church District, no bishop was elected until the 18th century. At first glance, this might be interpreted as a stricter adherence to the Calvinist model. However, the situation was not like that. Had it been so, the Puritans, led by János Tolnai Dali—who, following the English and Dutch examples, truly understood the essence of the synodal–presbyterial system—would not have sought to transform the structure of the Tiszáninneni district in the 1640s. The example of Gáspár Károli, one of the rural deans (as he was then called, seniors) of the Tiszáninneni district, shows that even the most respected senior could wield power and organizational strength comparable to that of a bishop. András Szabó, Károli’s most important contemporary researcher, demonstrates in detail how the preacher, who, in 1563, moved from the castle of Szatmár to Gönc with the support of the Dobó family, became the most respected and powerful dean of the surrounding area and, later, of the entire emerging church district. Thus, it came about that in January 1566, the first major legislative synod of the Tiszáninneni deaneries was held at his station, in Gönc.⁴ The powerful dean also maintained strict discipline in his own congregation. It is perhaps no coincidence that Károli received such almost episcopal authority at a time when antitrinitarian doctrines appeared in the region through Lukács Egri, doctrines which had to be fought against.

The Reformed Church that emerged in Hungary, therefore, was far from the synodal–presbyterial model in terms of its hierarchy and institutional structure. The ordination of ministers, the organizational tasks of institutionalization, and the preservation of confessional purity were all seen as more feasible within an episcopal (bishop-led) system. We see the same pattern in the Tiszántúl (Trans-Tisza) region, where, at the very beginning of the institutionalization of the church district, two strong personalities, Márton Kálmáncsehi Sánta and Péter Méliusz Juhász, held the office of bishop. Interestingly, although both were drawn to the Helvetic (Reformed) direction, and the Debrecen Confession is explicitly linked to Méliusz, after his death the church district continuously elected bishops who had been most influenced during their studies abroad by the Wittenberg perspective, and who thus took the hierarchical organizational order of the Lutheran Church as their model.⁵ It is true, though, that in the second half of the 16th century, those who joined the Reformation still studied primarily in Wittenberg.⁶ Although the students who studied there upon returning home mostly chose the Helvetic direction—indeed, by the end of the century the majority went to Wittenberg already with that commitment—they were more permissive regarding church governance and did not consider it essential to adopt the Geneva model. At the beginning of the 17th century, a pastor with

⁴SZABÓ András: Károlyi Gáspár, a gönci prédikátor letöltés dátuma: 2026. 09. 09.

⁵ZOVÁNYI Jenő: A Tiszántúli Református Egyházkerület története. I. Debrecen. 1939. 165-180.

⁶SZABÓ András: Coetus Ungaricus. A wittenbergi magyar diáktársaság 1555–1613, Budapest, Balassi Kiadó, 2017, 266–267.

precisely this outlook became the bishop of the Tiszántúl district: Lukács Hodászi.⁷ Through his strong personality Hodászi significantly expanded the Reformed interpretation of the episcopal office; at the same time he exemplified the temptation that has ever since been a potential attribute of the Reformed episcopacy: in the case of sufficiently strong personalities, a shift toward one-man rule.

At the same time, this conception of the episcopal office was far from the 16th-century Reformers, as the text of the Hercegszöllös canons clearly shows: “The superintendent shall do everything in agreement with the seniors; he shall not make decisions about difficult matters according to his own judgment.”⁸ In modern Hungarian: “The bishop shall not act on his own authority in any matter; if he initiates something, he shall present it to the rural deans and those concerned, and only act if they are in agreement.”⁹ Thus, the Reformers did not conceive the office of superintendent or bishop as analogous to the diocesan bishops of the medieval church and their jurisdiction; they sought to limit the bishop’s actions so as to include the community in decisions. Yet already the canons of 1576 seem to indicate that hierarchy itself was not regarded as evil. A careful reading of the canons reveals that they granted considerable power to the rural deans (seniors), and from the pastors obedience was primarily demanded toward the deans. Until the 18th century, the Tiszáninneni (Upper Tisza) Reformed Church District did not elect a bishop; however, in 1725 it had a list drawn up of its church officials,¹⁰ and during this survey Sámuel Thury, the rural dean/senior of Abaúj-Torna, described himself as “*superintendens aut senior*”¹¹.¹² This formulation was by no means accidental. In their own dioceses, rural deans often wielded episcopal power, just as bishops, too, frequently expanded the limits assigned to them during the Reformation era. It is no coincidence, therefore, that students who had studied at English and Dutch universities repeatedly confronted the church about its hierarchical structure. Among them were Imre Szilvásújfalvi Anderkő, pastor of Várad,¹³ and later the aforementioned Puritans, led by

⁷FEKETE Csaba: Hodászi tételei (1610) – Megjegyzések az RMNy 1009 leírásához. In: Magyar Könyvszemle. 2019. I. 91-94. <https://doi.org/10.17167/mksz.2019.1.91-94>

⁸„Minden Prédikátor nevét alatta írja” A református egyházszerveződés kezdetei Dunamelléken. Bp. 2026. Függelék. A HERCEGSZÖLLŐSI KÁNONOK LATIN NYELVŰ VERZIÓJÁNAK FORDÍTÁSA (Fordította BOGÁRDI Szabó István). 150.

⁹„Minden Prédikátor nevét alatta írja” A református egyházszerveződés kezdetei Dunamelléken. Bp. 2026. Függelék. A HERCEGSZÖLLŐSI KÁNONOK MAI MAGYAR NYELVEN (A szöveget átdolgozta SZABÓ András). 133.

¹⁰DIENES Dénes: Tanulmányok a Tiszáninneni Református Egyházkerület történetéből. Sárospatak, 1998. 27.

¹¹Szó szerint „felügyelő vagy rangidős”. A két kifejezés mai fordítása: püspök vagy esperes.

¹²Az 1731-ben kiadott Carolina Resolutio rendelkezései csak elmélyítették a hierarchikus gondolkodást, amennyiben egyrészt jogosítványokat adott katolikus püspököknek illetve főespereseknek a lelkészek fölött, másrészt viszont minden egyházkerületet szuperintendensek választására utasított. PRUZSINSZKY Pál: A Carolina Resolutio II. pontja; A Carolina Resolutio IX. pontja. In: Protestáns Szemle 1906. 78–83, 245–252.

¹³ÚJFALVI Imre pere és műveltsége. Tanulmányok és szövegközlések. Szerk. OLÁH Róbert. Debrecen. 2019. passim.

János Tolnai Dali.¹⁴ All of them criticized the hierarchical mindset, which stood in opposition to the synodal–presbyterial structure. This naturally followed from the social outlook of Hungarians in that era, but it also made it more difficult to realize the bottom-up organization emphasized by Johannes Althusius, a disciple of Calvin.¹⁵ Althusius, in his work *Politica methodice digesta* (1603), articulated the idea of a structure built from below, based on Calvin’s covenant theology and synodal–presbyterial system, which he termed consociatio.¹⁶ This was known about in Transylvania, but it did not become widely known. The 1646 Synod of Sztatmárnémeti acknowledged the legitimacy of consociatio but denied the timeliness of its introduction. However, during times of persecution initiatives for this kind of bottom-up organization sometimes emerged in Hungarian Reformed life, and in most cases these bore fruit that contributed to the church’s renewal. Such were the cases in the early modern period or the 18th century when congregations that had been left without a pastor were able, with incredible strength, to maintain Bible classes, build the congregation, and, if necessary, even physically the church building. Another example was the perseverance and survival of the Reformed community in 18th-century Miskolc in the face of the Counter-Reformation.¹⁷ Thus, from the beginning, Hungarian Reformed church governance bore the marks of top-down organization, yet a counter-movement was also present. Those who made room for bottom-up organization, or recognized its strength, did much to ensure that the church did not become a centralized institution, but preserved its openness to revivals and their integration into the community. After the revival movement of the early 20th century numerous small communities separated from a church that had by then often become inflexible. Even László Ravasz, who otherwise stood up for centralization, recognized that it was important to integrate grassroots revivals into the church, because it is precisely in mission that the possibility of passing on life—and of renewal—lies. Over the past centuries, many have raised questions that later generations should reconsider, again and again. In our church and congregations there are numerous bottom-up initiatives that could be far more fruitful if our inherited hierarchical reflexes did not stand in the way of their development. The fruits arising from the common work of believers and their pastors are treasures for which the church at present can be grateful, and which deserve to be known about and followed by many more. Movements in this direction can be hindered, or even halted, by inherited clericalism and reverence for authority. In the Reformation era, the *primus inter pares* principle—articulated in relation to the first bishops but barely realized in practice—has become more important today than

¹⁴ZOVÁNYI Jenő. Puritárius mozgalmak a magyar református egyházban. Budapest. 1911.

¹⁵FAZAKAS, Sándor. Közösséggé formálódás a reformatio vitae jegyében. Egy református politikaelmélet tanulságai – Johannes Althusius. In: „HISZEK AZ IGE DIADALMAS EREJÉBEN!” Tanulmányok FEKETE Károly 60. születésnapja alkalmából. Debreceni Református Hittudományi Egyetem, 2020. pp. 179–198.

¹⁶Thomas O. HÜGLIN: Early Modern Concepts for a Late Modern World. Althusius on Community and Federalism. WLU Press. 1999.

¹⁷DIENES Dénes: A miskolci református egyházköztség 1703–1918. Sárospatak. 2001. 4–24.

it was ever before. While giving also thanks for the past, a shared rethinking of the synodal–presbyterial ideal can help us to make room for God’s work among us in the present, and for the future.