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# The Challenges of the Pastoral Vocation in the Light of Historical and Social Changes

A Historical Overview of Unitarian Ministerial Duties



## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the evolution of Unitarian ministerial roles in the context of historical and social changes. The research employs sociological and historical methods to analyze the regulatory framework governing ministerial work, theological education, and the competencies required for fulfilling ministerial duties. Based on Blizzard's model, the ministerial role comprises three interconnected levels: traditional roles (preacher, teacher, liturgist), neo-traditional roles (pastoral care), and contemporary roles (community organizer, administrator). Findings indicate that while traditional roles remain strictly regulated, neo-traditional and contemporary roles allow for greater flexibility, enabling ministers to engage in a broader range of activities, including social services, cultural initiatives, and economic development. The study also highlights a shift in emphasis within ministerial roles, with increasing attention given to community-building, social work, and public engagement.

## KEYWORDS

Unitarian ministry, ministerial roles, historical changes, social engagement, theological education, institutional adaptation

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## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

The present paper is part of a broader research project examining the roles of Unitarian ministers within a comprehensive framework. The aim of this research is to investigate the changes in role of Unitarian ministers over the past three decades. These changes in role can be understood as the result of a combination of social changes, environmental expectations, the needs of ecclesiastical institutions, and the evolving self-perception of ministers regarding their vocation (SIBA 2016, BÁLINT 2023). The larger research employs sociological methodologies; however, in order to fully grasp the processes and manifestations of these changes, it must also rely on the methodologies of other social sciences, such as history, law, psychology, and theology. Understanding the extent and nature of these changes requires familiarity with the theological, historical, legal, organizational, and social contexts within which these developments have taken place, evolved, and continue to change.

Before delving into the topic, it is necessary to clarify some of the defining features of the Unitarian religious tradition. The Unitarian denomination is a product of the Reformation in Eastern Europe. Emerging in the 16th century within the Principality of Transylvania (Western part of Romania today), the movement with its centre in Cluj (Kolozsvár) is historically and theologically embedded in the Protestant tradition. It is often referred to as a branch of the Radical Reformation (KOVÁCS 2017); however, due to its institutional consolidation in the 16th and 17th centuries, it followed a trajectory similar to that of other Protestant denominations in Transylvania. (KOVÁCS 2021) The theological interpretation of Unitarian clergy roles traces back to the Western European Reformation, while the institutional framework of these roles closely mirrors that of other Hungarian and primarily Transylvanian Protestant denominations, particularly those of the Reformed Church. Although the social and political environment in Transylvania generally provided a similar framework for Protestant ministers of different denominations, the distinctly Unitarian understanding of the vocation, shaped by both theological and institutional factors, resulted in certain differences in pastoral roles compared to other denominations. Findings from an ongoing study about pastoral roles and theological educations indicate that Unitarian ministers, in contrast to their counterparts in other denominations, tend to engage more actively in secular activities, particularly in social and community organization (KATÓ – KISS – BÁLINT 2024).

This study examines only a small segment of this broader topic. Its objective is to explore the historical development of Unitarian clergy roles in light of institutional expectations, specifically focusing on the evolution of ecclesiastical regulations and theological education.

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<sup>1</sup> The translation was assisted by ChatGPT-4o and revised for accuracy by the author.

## A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE UNITARIAN CHURCH

The Unitarian denomination emerged in Transylvania, but at various points in history, between the 16th and 18th centuries, congregations also existed in present-day Hungary, particularly in the Southern part (Baranya). The denomination, which suffered significant losses in the 17th and 19th centuries due to the religious policies of Protestant rulers and the Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation, experienced a major turning point with the issuance of the Edict of Tolerance in 1781 by Emperor Joseph II. The edict granted greater religious freedom to non-Catholic denominations within the Habsburg Empire. During this period, one-third of the church buildings were either rebuilt or newly constructed, educational institutions stabilized, and following the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867, opportunities arose for the development of Unitarian communities in Hungary (KOVÁCS 2021, ERDŐ 1986, KEDEI 2002). As a result of 19th-century industrialization and urbanization, Unitarian communities also appeared outside their historical geographical context in industrial cities, particularly in Southern Transylvania as well as in larger cities all over the country (Hungary) where Unitarian presence had previously been minimal. The 20th century brought further significant changes. After World War I, due to the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, Transylvania, Banat and Partium were annexed to Romania (PÁL 2011). This led to serious organizational, administrative (and emotional) challenges for the Unitarian Church, leading by the mid-century to the split of the church body into two parts. This division was finalized with the complete institutional separation in 1968, when the Hungarian Unitarian Church was established (PÁL 2010, KOVÁCS 2021, ERDŐ 1986).

A major turning point came in 2012 when the institutional reunification of the Transylvanian and Hungarian Unitarian Churches restored the previous unity, forming the Hungarian Unitarian Church. Today, the majority of Unitarian church members reside in Romania, specifically in Transylvania where 90% of the congregations are located. However, a significant Unitarian community also exists in Hungary. According to the 2021 Romanian census, 54% of the Unitarian population lived in rural areas and 46% in urban areas. In Hungary, the census recorded 6,552 individuals, primarily residing in urban environments (BÁLINT – KISS 2024).

The Unitarian Church is organized into a three-leveled structure: mikro/local level (the parish), mezo/intermediate level (the church district in Romania or diocese in Hungary), macro/upper level (the universal church). The church's current organizational system follows the synodal-presbyterian principle, meaning that each level has autonomous self-governance and legal personality. In Romania, there are six church districts, encompassing 114 main congregations and 41 associate ones (filia) (PETRE 2022). In Hungary, the church diocese includes 11 main and one filial congregation. 96,2% of its members are ethnic Hungarians (BÁLINT – KISS 2024).

At the core of Unitarian doctrine is the belief in the indivisible unity of God, explicitly rejecting the concept of the Trinity. Jesus is regarded as a prophet and teacher, and the faith emphasizes the immortality of the soul, respect for life and creation, the inherent goodness of humanity, and its potential for development. In theological matters, the Bible – interpreted through reason and conscience – serves as the final authority (REZI 2009).

## METHODOLOGY

In my research, I employ document analysis. First, I examine historical documents (ecclesiastical legal regulations and bylaws) (TÓTH 1922, UZONI – KOZMA – FOSZTÓ 2018, MIKÓ 1931, MUE 2012, 2014) to analyze the legal regulations governing the Unitarian ministerial vocation. Second, I assess the content and structural changes in pastoral training and their relevance to pastoral roles. Following this, I investigate how societal changes from the 19th to the 21st century have impacted pastoral roles. Finally, I focus on the extent to which the currently applicable legal frameworks allow Unitarian ministers to navigate and fulfill the increasingly prominent contemporary pastoral roles.

## THE EVOLUTION OF PASTORAL ROLES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE REFORMATION

The Reformation did not arise solely from a need of religious renewal but was the result of the convergence of economic, social, and political processes (CHADWICK 2003). This historical context also led to a paradigm shift in the status of the clergy. Several key concepts emerge in this regard: desacralization, professionalization, the institution of the clerical family, and social mobility. Desacralization refers to the transformation of the clergy's role, which, in medieval perception, was distinct from the laity due to its sacramental status as a mediator of divine grace. The Reformation altered this perception, shifting the emphasis from the sacred dimension of the clergy to their preaching role. The ministers were perceived as interpreters of the Scripture. The Protestant clergy role was fundamentally shaped by Reformation theology, which emphasized the sole authority of Scripture. Within this framework, the primary responsibility of the Protestant minister became the competent interpretation of the Bible, through preaching and teaching. Consequently, the content of the profession, rather than its form, defined the minister's status (SIBA 2020; DIXON 2003; GREEN 2003, KAMPMANN 2013). The concept of professionalization describes the process through which institutional structures were established to meet this new expectation. The effective fulfillment of the teaching and preaching roles required specialized knowledge, which in turn led to the formation of theological training institutions to prepare ministers systematically. The consolidation of ministerial education and its linkage to formal training resulted in the professionalization of the Protestant ministerial vocation (KAMPMANN 2013, KAUFMANN 2003; BÁLINT 2023). This development, in turn, contributed to the legitimization of the status and the reinforcement of its social role (SWANSON 2003).

A key factor in the reinterpretation of ministerial status was the minister's role within the community, which manifested in multiple dimensions. One primary source of legitimacy came from community integration. A crucial factor in redefining the minister's status was their role within the community, which had multiple dimensions. One source of legitimacy was the minister's integration into the community. In Lutheran thought, ministers were chosen and entrusted with their duties by the members of the congregation, who also had the power to recall them. However, this practice was only feasible in larger, urban communities, where the economic, political, and human resources necessary for self-governance were available. In rural congregations, the local landowner or ruling prince was responsible

for appointing ministers and ensuring their working conditions. This arrangement created a dual role for the minister—especially in the latter case: they were both a member of the community, serving its interests, and at the same time, a representative and intermediary of the ruling authority (KAMPMANN 2013, KRANT – NUNN 2003). Another key aspect of community integration was the institution of the clerical family. Unlike their medieval Catholic counterparts, Protestant ministers were allowed to marry and have families. In the early sixteenth century, the marital status of clergy became a symbol of the Reformation. The establishment of the clerical family had several consequences: family members became part of local social networks, integrating into the congregation; the presence of a clerical family created additional material needs (e.g., the need for a study room for the minister, living expenses for family members); it sometimes became a source of conflict within the congregation. Finally, the clerical family facilitated social mobility over generations. Sons often followed in their fathers' ministerial footsteps, and through the marriage alliances of clerical wives, the clergy became increasingly integrated into the influential middle class (KAMPMANN 2013, KRANT – NUNN 2003). Naturally, these processes unfolded in different forms across various regions of Europe. The spread of the Reformation and the process of confessionalization in Central and Eastern Europe occurred with a temporal delay compared to Western Europe. However, this period is marked by the emergence of a new social class, primarily defined by its roles in preaching, teaching, pastoral care, community leadership, and administrative duties (BÁLINT 2023).

In defining pastoral roles, I base my approach on Samuel L. BLIZZARD's (1985) model. According to Blizzard these roles manifest on three levels: master role, integrative role, practitioner role. Blizzard uses the concept of the master role to describe the ministerial identity, reflecting both the beliefs and perceptions that ministers hold about their own vocation, as well as the public's expectations and interpretations of the ministerial role. Ministers approach and embody their master role differently, depending on their personal understanding and professional orientation. Their interactions with individuals and groups can also vary based on the objectives they prioritize in their pastoral work. Blizzard defines a minister's goal orientation in their professional work as the integrative role. This role represents what ministers seek to achieve in their interactions with people while fulfilling their vocation. It is less broad than the master role but serves as a guiding framework for the minister's engagement with church members, ecclesiastical institutions, community groups, and the wider public (BLIZZARD 1985.65). In other words, it reflects how the minister intends to fulfill their vocation. The integrative orientation enables a minister to focus their master role on specific pastoral objectives, such as evangelism, education, pastoral care, or community organizing (BLIZZARD 1985.51).

Finally, we arrive at the third level of roles defined in Blizzard's previously referenced study: the specific, so-called practitioner roles of ministers. He considers practitioner roles to be those publicly performed ministerial functions that shape how people perceive and construct their image of a minister (BLIZZARD 1985.51). Practitioner roles represent the practical ways in which the responsibilities assumed within the integrative role are carried out. These roles are less general and more specific in nature (BLIZZARD 1985.83). Blizzard categorizes them into three groups: traditional roles (which have biblical models): preacher, priest

(liturgist), and teacheré neo-traditional roles (which have a biblical foundation but are practiced with some ambiguity): pastor; contemporary roles (which are relatively new in church tradition and practice, with no clearly defined scriptural or ideological foundations); administrative and organizational roles (BLIZZARD 1985.83–85).

In the following sections of my study, I will examine the evolution of pastoral duties on two levels: through the lens of ecclesiastical regulations, focusing on the formal requirements of ministerial training; respectively at the level of environmental changes and specific contextual factors. I will analyze the extent to which these changes align with Blizzard's model on minister's practical roles and how they reflect the shifting expectations and roles of the clergy.

## THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF UNITARIAN CLERICAL DUTIES IN THE LIGHT OF ECCLESIASTICAL REGULATIONS

The duties of Unitarian ministers were framed by various ecclesiastical regulations. Until the first half of the 17th century, with the publication of the *Disciplina Ecclesiastica* in 1626 (TÓTH 1922.15), there was no structured ecclesiastical regulation, known as a *church ordinance*, that systematically governed the operation of the church. Instead, the internal order of the church was maintained through ad hoc measures. For example, in 1579, the Synod convened in Cluj (Kolozsvár) issued prescriptions regarding the clergy. These regulations were primarily theological in nature, defining the direction of religious teachings, but also included stipulations regarding the appointment and transfer of ministers. One such directive stated: “No minister shall dare to exchange his position or choose another place without the knowledge of the superintendent and the consistory.” (JAKAB 1879. 241) The decrees of the 1601 Synod of Turda concerning ministers include: 1. *The bishop shall have the authority to remove a minister or rector from their position and transfer them to another congregation where their service is needed.* 2. *No minister shall leave their congregation unless they have first received a lawful successor.* 3. *No minister shall hold multiple congregations at once if these congregations are capable of sustaining their own minister; likewise, no minister shall usurp the role of a school-master.* (TÓTH 1922.15)

These regulations were primarily concerned with the administrative, ecclesiastical governance, and disciplinary aspects of the clergy's life. According to several scholars, Unitarians relied on the *Canones Minores* (or later *De Disciplina Ecclesiastica*) compiled by György Gönczi, a Reformed minister from Debrecen, or on Melius Péter's *Canones Majores* KÉNOSI – UZONI 2009, TÓTH 1922). However, comparative studies of these regulations reveal that only about one-quarter of Unitarian laws are reflected in the aforementioned Reformed church rules (MOLNÁR 2020, KOVÁCS 2021). In 1626, the *Disciplina Ecclesiastica* Radeciana, issued under Valentinus Radeczky, bishop of the Unitarian Church (c. 1550–1632), became a universally applicable ecclesiastical ordinance for all congregations. This regulation defined doctrinal principles (marking the closure of the dogmatic system) and comprehensively addressed church life, including the duties of ministers in a detailed and structured manner. Key topics covered in the *Disciplina Ecclesiastica* Radeciana: Resolution of disputes, administration of the Lord's Supper and Baptism, adherence to dogmatic expectations, ministerial dress code and conduct,

upholding a moral life, avoiding drunkenness, sanctification of Sundays and formal requirements for weddings, liturgical practices (e.g., recitation of the Lord's Prayer), veneration of Jesus, appointments and changes of ministerial posts, prohibition of usury (UZONI – KOZMA – FOSZTÓ 2018, KOVÁCS 2021).

The *Disciplina* established a standardized set of doctrinal and ethical norms, consolidating ministerial duties and expectations in the Unitarian Church. This regulatory framework shaped the development of Unitarian clerical responsibilities for decades to come.

In 1694, during the episcopacy of Gergely Mihály Almási, the *Disciplina* was republished with some modifications. The chapter „On the General Duties of Those Who Hold the Clerical Office” followed the logic of the regulations issued during Valentin Radeckzy's tenure, but with significant expansions. Notably, this revised version did not only regulate the minister's attire and conduct but extended these rules to their family members as well. Additionally, it provided a more detailed description of the minister's administrative responsibilities. Key new elements included: compulsory Sunday education for children from St. George's Day to St. Michael's Day; more extensive administrative obligations related to marriages, increasing the minister's responsibilities in overseeing these processes. The regulation also included the ministerial oath, in which the clergy committed to preaching the gospel, maintaining the expected moral conduct, embracing self-sacrifice, and pledging obedience to the church hierarchy (UZONI – KOZMA – FOSZTÓ 2018).

From the perspective of our topic, the 1614 regulation, titled “Order to Be Followed During the Examination of Congregations”, is particularly significant. This regulation defined the procedures for the ecclesiastical visitation specifying the criteria by which a minister's service should be evaluated. The primary focus of the visitation was on doctrinal, theological, and liturgical matters. However, beyond these, the review also examined aspects of ministerial conduct, including: attire, personal behavior, sobriety, family life, financial management, ecclesiastical administration (TÓTH 1922). This regulatory framework clearly highlights the administrative role of the minister, as their financial and organizational responsibilities were considered essential to their function. This order remained in effect until 1741 (MOLNÁR 2002).

An important addition is that in the 16th and 17th centuries, church leadership was primarily concentrated in the hands of the clergy. The Synod consisted of ministers and schoolmasters, meaning that the governance of the church was carried out by the theologically educated elite, while the secular element was excluded from this process (KOVÁCS 2010). Although by the 17th century there were instances—exclusively in cities—where certain tasks, mainly related to financial management, were performed by laypeople, this did not materialize in rural congregations. The structure of the church organization can be regarded as synodal-consistorial.

During this period, based on the above, pastoral roles can be categorized as follows: 1. Preaching and liturgical role (regulation of ceremonies and worship services). 2. Apologetic and teaching role (ensuring the transmission of doctrines and defending church teachings). 3. Pastoral role (striving to resolve conflicts and representing social justice). 4. Community and moral leader (regulating the behavior of the faithful and serving as a moral example). 5. Administrator (supervising the assets of the congregation and acting as an official). When comparing the ministerial roles of this period with Blizzard's model, we observe that—consistent with prior expectations—the regulation of traditional pastoral roles was the primary concern. Given that this was a time of doctrinal and institutional consolidation, the roles of preacher, priest, and teacher were central

to these regulations. The pastoral role was not so much focused on spiritual care but rather on maintaining and enforcing moral norms. Ministers were expected not only to conform doctrinally but also to lead exemplary lives and encourage others to do the same. However, the widespread practice of *pastors retention* in this period significantly limited their room for maneuver, as their official status did not necessarily provide protection against the power of congregation members and patrons, especially in rural communities. Finally, the administrative role gradually emerged and can be divided into two areas: management (oversight of movable and immovable property); official administration (handling marriages, keeping church registers, etc.)

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At the beginning of the 18th century, under Habsburg rule, the politically and religiously motivated pressure resulting from the state-supported Roman Catholic restoration efforts led to the unification of clerical and secular elements. In 1718, the church elected two chief lay presidents. Alongside the Generale Consistorium, presided over by the bishop, the Supremum Consistorium was established, led by the chief lay president. This period saw the consolidation of the role of laity in church governance. With the issuance of the Edict of Toleration in 1781, a new era began in the church's history, characterized by renewal and development. (MOLNÁR 2002, MIKÓ 1931)

This period also marks a turning point regarding the work of ministers. The era between 1568 and 1778 was characterized by a unique practice that defined the position of ministers—their service, social, and economic status—known as pastor's retention (TÓTH 1910). The essence of this practice was that ministers had to declare annually whether they would remain in the community, while the congregation had to decide whether to retain them. Its development was closely linked to the process of the Reformation in Transylvania and was connected to the transitional nature of doctrinal processes and the right of congregations to elect their pastors. However, from the perspective of our topic, what is particularly significant is how this practice influenced the social status of ministers and, consequently, their ability to fulfill their calling. Ferencz Egyed, a Unitarian minister from Homoródszentpál, highlighted its negative aspects in 1881: the pressure to conform, the need for constant adaptation, vulnerability, and job insecurity, all of which could even compromise the mission of the gospel. At times, the number of vacant pastoral positions was notably high. (EGYED 1881.128.)

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The next period brought significant changes to church governance. By the late 18th century, a governing body composed of lay members, known as the presbyterium (board), emerged at the congregational level. In 1785, references appear regarding the regulation of presbyteries and the role of curators and wardens. However, the establishment of presbyteries was a long process throughout the church, and even by the mid-19th century, they were not yet universally adopted. (KOVÁCS 2010, TÓTH 1910)

Regarding the appointment of ministers, the period between 1778 and 1840 is known as the era of appointment by decree. This state-imposed change, based on a royal decree, abolished the pastor retention system and placed the authority of ministerial appointments under the Generale Consistorium and Synodale Consistorium. These higher church bodies, in turn, delegated the power of appointment to the bishop, who thus gained practically unlimited authority over

pastoral placements. This shift had two major consequences: 1. external intervention in the autonomy of congregational governance. 2. the consolidation of power within the church hierarchy, strengthening the authority of church leaders at the expense of local congregations' right to self-governance. (TÓTH 1910)

This came to an end in 1840, when the Synod decreed that pastoral positions should be filled through a competitive application process. However, due to administrative difficulties (such as challenges in ensuring public transparency and the slow pace of bureaucratic procedures), after five years, a selection process based on elections was introduced. This system was later refined by the General Council of 1889, and with necessary updates, its fundamental principles remain in effect to this day.

By the end of this period, the synod-presbyterian system, based on the principle of representation, had already taken shape in a preliminary form and was fully established by the end of the century. On January 1, 1900, the Church Law regulating the authorities and administrative structure of the (Hungarian) Unitarian Church came into effect. This law assigned the curator (lay president) and the presbytery (board) the responsibility for overseeing and ensuring church financial management. The duties of ministers were primarily defined in the areas of spiritual leadership, religious services, pastoral care, moral education, and administration, with an expectation of exemplary conduct. I do not provide here a detailed discussion of Articles 55–106 of Section VI, as they follow the same framework as the currently applicable regulations, which I will elaborate on in detail later. (TÓTH 1910, 1922)

The Organizational Regulations of the Unitarian Church of the People's Republic of Romania, adopted in 1923 and 1949, as well as the Fundamental Law of the Hungarian Unitarian Church and other legal provisions enacted in 1997, 2003, and 2012, respectively 2014 are based on early 20th-century prescriptions concerning pastoral responsibilities. These regulations did not introduce substantial changes in this regard. Differences primarily stem from state-imposed bureaucratic and administrative requirements. (SZABÓ 1998)

In summary, the synod-presbyterian church structure, established along representative principles, has maintained consistent expectations for ministers since the early 20th century. It appears that the core roles of the Protestant ministry, shaped by the Reformation, have remained unchanged: preacher, teacher, priest (liturgist), pastoral caregiver, administrator, and organizer. However, shifts in emphasis among these roles have already begun. Although not explicitly reflected in legal regulations, the 1857 expansion of ministerial training—which introduced practical subjects such as agriculture, horticulture, and public health—indicates that the roles defined as contemporary in Blizzard's model were increasingly integrating into ministerial work. At the same time, church regulations primarily define a broader legal framework, which delineates the scope of ministerial duties. Following a historical overview of ministerial training, I will examine these aspects in detail.

## **HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF MINISTERIAL TRAINING**

Both the 1626 and 1694 editions of the *Disciplina* addressed the duties of pastoral candidates. Given that the professionalization of the ministry requires formal theological education, I will briefly summarize some key aspects of Unitarian ministerial training. The development of ministerial education can be divided into several phases. (KOVÁCS 2019, BOROS 1916)

The first phase spanned from 1566 to 1847, with training conducted at the academy in Cluj. The institution provided education not only for future ministers (*togati*) but also for students pursuing secular careers. Initially, the philosophy course lasted three years, but from 1794, it was extended to four years. Students preparing for the ministry or teaching received theological and practical training, including Hebrew, Greek, homiletics, liturgics, and church history. (BOROS 1916) This system evolved slightly over time according to changing needs and the expertise of teachers, but its basic structure remained unchanged until the mid-19th century. (BOROS 1916) Before assuming a ministerial position, candidates were required to teach for at least three years as lecturers at a secondary school or as masters in a congregational school. Even after receiving an appointment, ministers had to pass an examination before the partial synod and the general council. (KOVÁCS 2019, BOROS 1916)

The second phase began with the 1845 Synod which decided to separate theological education from philosophical studies. As a result, becoming a minister required students to extend their philosophical studies by an additional two years of theological training.

The introduction of this specialized training marked an early step toward the professionalization of the ministry, and it was officially implemented in 1847. During this training, students studied dogmatics, ethics, homiletics, catechetics, liturgics (“priestly studies”), canon law, church history, biblical archaeology, and exegesis. (BOROS 1916, KOVÁCS 2019)

In 1857, a new chapter began in ministerial education, as the two-year theological course was extended by an additional year. Alongside the previous subjects, practical disciplines were introduced, including pedagogy, agricultural and horticultural studies, public health, and renewed emphasis on legal studies. Additionally, ministerial candidates had the opportunity to study English at the seminary. In 1859, the previous examination system—which required candidates to be tested before the partial Synod and General Council—was abolished. Instead, it was replaced by a comprehensive examination conducted by a specially designated committee. (BOROS 1916, KOVÁCS 2019)

In 1896, with the establishment of the Unitarian Theological Institute, theological education was completely separated from high school education. The independent institution was led by a dean, and the duration of studies was extended to four years. Candidates studied systematic theology, Old and New Testament biblical studies, and practical theology, while they could also attend philosophy, law, and pedagogy courses at Ferencz József University. (BOROS 1916) From 1909 onward, practical ministerial training gained increasing importance. In 1915, the General Council elevated the institution to academic status, and by 1928, the duration of training was extended to five years. (KOVÁCS 2019)

A major transformation occurred in 1949 with the state-imposed establishment of the University-Level Protestant Theological Institute by the Reformed, Unitarian, Saxon, and Hungarian Lutheran denominations. The institute operated with three divisions—Reformed, Unitarian, and Lutheran—and had seven departments: Old Testament Studies, New Testament Studies, General Church History, Religious Studies, Mission Studies, Romanian Language and Romanian Orthodox Church Literature, Russian Language and Russian Orthodox Church Literature (KOLUMBÁN) Despite this institutional restructuring, Unitarian ministerial training continued in its traditional form and location at the Unitarian Academy for 12 more years. In 1959, the institute underwent further reorganization, leading to the dissolution of independent faculties and

the creation of the University-Level Unified Protestant Theological Institute in Cluj-Napoca. By 1962, the institution gained the right to offer doctoral programs. (KOVÁCS 2019)

Following the 1989 regime change, the institute received accreditation in 2011 for master's level education under the Bologna higher education system. This reform established a two-stage ministerial training model, consisting of undergraduate university education and master's-level training. The education is offered in three specializations: Reformed, Unitarian, and Lutheran. The curriculum includes traditional theological subjects: Biblical Theology, Systematic Theology, Practical Theology, Church History. Additionally, new disciplines such as missionary practice, ecumenism, canon law, legal studies, and modern and classical languages (Hungarian, Romanian, Latin, and modern foreign languages) have been incorporated. Each specialization includes: Seminars (Biblical Theology, Systematic Theology, Church History) and practical courses (Homiletics, Catechetics, Poimenics, Church Music) (KOVÁCS 2022) Currently, ministerial education follows a content-centered model, where the curriculum and teaching methods are shaped primarily by the internal scientific logic of the discipline and the relationships between theological fields. (KATÓ – KISS – BÁLINT 2024)

The evolution of the various stages of ministerial training clearly illustrates the process through which theological education transitioned from philosophical instruction to professional vocational training. In the first phase, education provided the competencies necessary for preaching, teaching, and liturgical duties, placing a strong emphasis on dogmatics, theology, and apologetics. Pastoral care gained prominence only from the mid-19th century, while the organizational, administrative, and leadership roles also became increasingly significant after that period. The need for change emerged as a response to both ecclesiastical realities and broader societal transformations. However, despite the structural and content-related modifications outlined above, ministerial training today is still fundamentally based on the 18th-century educational model. It continues to focus primarily on preaching, liturgical, teaching, and pastoral competencies, while skills essential for contemporary church leadership—such as administrative management, institutional representation, group dynamics, and communication—remain underemphasized. Nevertheless, some shifts in this area are observable. (KATÓ – KISS – BÁLINT 2024)

## THE CHANGING SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT AND MINISTERIAL ROLES

Given that the challenges of earlier periods were primarily centered on dogmatic and (religious) political issues, I will briefly summarize the church's responses to the social changes of the late 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries. In terms of ministerial training, I have already mentioned the introduction of economic and horticultural, health subjects in the mid 19th century. Additionally, local church-led initiatives reflect the church's role in social organization. These efforts are evident in village development (cooperatives), public education (folk high schools), and cultural activities. The execution of these socio-cultural and economic development projects has largely been entrusted to ministers. The topic is best illustrated through the activities of József Ürmösy and Ferenc Balázs, as well as the ministers who gathered around them and participated in these community-building efforts. (BÁLINT 2023)

In response to social changes, ecclesiastical authorities have issued various recommendations regarding ministerial duties. The 1912 General Council highlights the need for clergy to

engage more deeply in community life, particularly in countering secularization. The General Council emphasized the importance of organizing religious evening gatherings during the winter months, utilizing quiet evenings as an opportunity for moral and spiritual enrichment. Consequently, the mandatory implementation of winter religious evening programs was proposed. The Church Representative Council also encouraged ministers to actively engage in the social lives of their congregants and to provide moral, social, and educational instruction. The council praised the efforts of ministers who organized reading and religious evening programs, often with the help of teachers and lay members, noting that those who neglected this duty failed in their pastoral responsibilities. (TÓTH 1921. 11–12.) This broad ministerial engagement was particularly characteristic of the interwar period, during which ministers took on multiple roles beyond traditional clerical duties. Ministers acted as economic organizers, community leaders, and cultural facilitators, serving as: administrators of agricultural and credit cooperatives (e.g., Hangya, dairy cooperatives, machinery associations), presidents of local church organizations (e.g., Dávid Ferenc Society), choir directors and private educators, members of cooperative boards and food supply commissioners. These expanded roles highlight the increasing social, economic, and cultural responsibilities placed upon ministers during this era. (BALÁZS 2013, SOMAI 2007, BÁLINT 2023)

The establishment of the state socialist system led to the complete dismantling of church communities' infrastructure. It abolished their social organizations and independent economic structures, significantly limiting both the church's socialization capacity and its financial stability and institutional functioning. Parallel to this, a systematic campaign of anti-religious ideology and church suppression was launched at both theoretical and practical levels. The Department of Religious Affairs, headquartered in Bucharest, along with its regional inspectors, exerted strict control over all aspects of church life, particularly in the early period. This included constant surveillance of worship services, scrutiny of ministers' activities, and direct interventions in church operations. (PÁL 2021, KOVÁCS 2021, BÁLINT 2023) This era was marked by a clear restriction and transformation of church activities, leading to the decline of key ministerial roles. Many traditional church functions essentially withered away, and this directly affected the role of ministers. During this time, ministerial duties became highly restricted, focusing only on: religious services and sacraments, family visits and religious instruction, church administration. These functions were severely constrained by the state. While the broader scope of ministerial work had expanded in earlier periods, state socialism forced a dramatic narrowing of pastoral activities, reducing the church's social integration and influence. (PÁL 2021, OLÁH 2020)

The political, economic, and social changes after 1989 brought significant transformations to the life of religious denominations in Romania. Churches gained greater freedom to strengthen their internal mission work and organizational operations. The strict marginalization of religion in society ended, allowing churches to re-enter public spaces and participate in state institutions. This shift enabled them to assume broader social roles, beyond the previously restricted internal church activities. (BÁLINT 2023) Within this new framework, churches expanded their liturgical functions and strengthened their faith-based and moral education initiatives, including: spiritual groups, Bible studies, and parish religious education, missionary activities such as religious publishing, pilgrimages, and large-scale community events, additionally, churches were able

to reestablish church-based social organizations, such as: youth associations, Women's unions. The growing demand for religious services, coupled with previous decades of state-imposed institutional downsizing, prompted human resource development within denominations. This included: significant expansion of ministerial training programs, the establishment of church music (cantor) training, the introduction of religious teacher education. These efforts led to substantial institutional and organizational growth, marking a new era of religious and ministerial engagement in Romanian society. (BÁLINT 2023)

Beyond their traditional ecclesiastical structures, churches have extended their presence into various social subsystems, actively engaging in multiple areas of public life. Education: religious education in schools, university chaplaincy programs; Social and healthcare services: establishment of nursing homes, orphanages, hospital chaplaincy, and prison chaplaincy; Cultural and community life: organizing cultural events, involvement in media, publishing books; civil society: participation in associations, foundations, and non-governmental organizations; political sphere: engagement in policy-making and public discourse. These developments highlight the church's evolving role as a social actor, adapting to contemporary needs and challenges. (Kiss 2017)

Ministers have found themselves in a range of new roles, transitioning from preachers confined within church walls to central figures in community life. Due to the economic and cultural globalization processes, the social conditions defining the life of Transylvanian Hungarians have changed, bringing new societal challenges to churches as well. One clear indicator of this shift is the transformation of ministerial duties. Ministers often demonstrate greater adaptability than the institutional church, as religious institutions tend to respond more slowly to change. This is partly because one of the fundamental missions of the church is to preserve tradition, which makes it more cautious toward transformation. (BÁLINT 2023) As a result, a growing gap has emerged between: the tasks expected of ministers by the church vs. the actual challenges they face in daily ministry; the theological training provided to ministers vs. the real-life demands of pastoral service. (KATÓ – KISS – BÁLINT 2023) In the final section of the study, I will examine the institutional framework and current regulations governing ministerial work and explore the opportunities they provide for new initiatives.

## **CURRENT ECCLESIASTICAL REGULATIONS REGARDING MINISTERIAL ROLES**

The rights and duties of Unitarian ministers are defined in the currently valid Fundamental Law and Organizational and Operational Regulations.<sup>2</sup> These regulations establish the normative framework set by the church as an institution concerning ministerial service<sup>3</sup>. Since this section of the study focuses on congregational ministry, I will limit my analysis to the relevant legal provisions.

<sup>2</sup> The Church Fundamental Law (Alaptörvény, MUE 2012) of the Hungarian Unitarian Church, adopted on June 28, 2012, came into effect on June 30, 2012. Additionally, the Organizational and Operational Regulations (OOR, Szervezeti és Működési Szabályzat), adopted on June 30, 2012, underwent modifications on June 28, 2014, which came into force on the same day.

<sup>3</sup> 56. § Within the Church, congregational ministers and ministers assigned to non-congregational duties perform their service. (SzMSz 2014)

The Fundamental Law outlines the church's mission in the following key areas: religious life, charitable service, education and upbringing, public culture, social responsibility<sup>4</sup>. As the designated representative of the church within a specific congregation, the minister is expected to carry out their duties in alignment with these objectives. (MUE 2014)

The congregational minister fulfills two primary roles: as a religious leader, they guide the faith and moral life of the congregation, while as an administrator, they are responsible for the management and financial affairs of the parish. The minister is regarded as a moral role model for the community, whose personal life and service must be in harmony. Expected Ministerial Image: the regulations do not separate professional and private life; rather, they present the minister as a role model for the community. Expectations for Ministers: their personal life must align with their service and be characterized by: religiosity, fraternal love, self-devotion, the practice of Christian virtues. (MUE 2014)

Section 59 provides a detailed regulation of ministerial responsibilities, which are divided into four main areas: 1. Leading worship services and ceremonies – following liturgical rules, preparing couples for marriage, and instructing converts. 2. Pastoral care – visiting families and the sick, providing assistance to those in need. 3. Religious and moral education – organizing religion classes, confirmation programs, youth activities, and Bible study sessions. 4. Parish administration – managing representation, administration, finances, and organizational duties within the congregation.

Additional community and social involvement: ministers may participate in other areas of church service, such as charity work, cultural activities, heritage preservation, media engagement, and community service. However, these are not mandatory but rather recommended roles. The church encourages ministers to actively shape congregational life, either as initiators or supporters of various community efforts. (MUE 2014)

Ministers are encouraged to engage professionally in various church-related fields, including: Charitable service and social work, public education, cultural heritage preservation, and monument protection, publishing and media activities, other forms of social responsibility and community service. However, the regulations do not impose an obligation to perform these tasks. Instead, ministers are expected to participate according to their capabilities and opportunities. They should take on a role as an initiator, organizer, and leader, or at the very least, as an active participant and motivator in the overall life of the congregation. (MUE 2014)

The above regulations establish clear ministerial responsibilities while also providing a flexible framework that allows ministers to adapt to contemporary challenges and engage in broader social and community activities based on their individual abilities and competencies. Ministerial roles can be categorized into two main structures: 1. religious specialist – including the

<sup>4</sup> “The Hungarian Unitarian Church is part of the universal Christian Church, a community of love made up of followers of Jesus who seek to live out the Kingdom of God. The monotheistic, Unitarian Christianity, which traces its origins to the teachings of Jesus and his direct disciples, took on an institutional church form during the Reformation era and has continued to develop while embracing the progressive values of history. Its mission is to serve God and humanity and to build communal life. Its foundational text is the Bible. The Hungarian Unitarian Church proclaims: the oneness of God, the importance of following Jesus' example and teachings, reverence for the created world, life, and family, the inherent goodness of humanity, individual responsibility, and salvation through character, eternal life, the significance of faith, reason, and conscience. The church proclaims and practices: freedom of conscience and religion, openness to understanding religious and ideological diversity, interdenominational tolerance and social justice. Areas of mission: the Hungarian Unitarian Church carries out its mission in the fields of: religious life, charitable service, education and upbringing, public culture, social responsibility” (CFL 2012. 2.)

roles of preacher, teacher, liturgist, and pastoral caregiver. 2. administrator-official – covering organizational, financial, and administrative duties within the church. Beyond these core roles, ministers may take on expanded responsibilities in social, community, and public engagement. The traditional ministerial roles are clearly regulated and less flexible, ensuring consistency in worship, teaching, and pastoral care. The contemporary or modern roles offer greater flexibility, allowing for individual adaptation in social services, cultural initiatives, and community leadership. This dual structure ensures that ministers can fulfill their traditional duties while also responding dynamically to the evolving needs of the church and society. (MUE 2014)

As previously argued, the core role structure of the Protestant ministerial vocation has remained unchanged: preacher, teacher, priest (liturgist), pastor, administrator-official, organizer. However, significant changes have occurred in the emphasis placed on these roles and in the nature of their fulfillment. While traditional, well-defined roles remain essential, there has been a notable increase in the importance of what Blizard refers to as contemporary ministerial roles. These emerging roles reshape the scope and practice of ministerial work, reflecting the evolving social, cultural, and institutional expectations placed upon clergy. The outcome of a pilot study examining contemporary ministerial roles confirms the previously stated claim. The study highlights how Unitarian ministers in the Turda area engage in a broad range of activities beyond traditional pastoral duties, responding to local needs and ministerial initiatives. (BÁLINT 2023) Data was collected from 12 ministers, aged 30 to 50+, many of whom hold additional degrees (e.g., psychology, sociology, economics) or specialized training (e.g., grant writing, psychodrama). Their additional expertise is typically used within their ministerial work rather than as an independent profession. The ministers engage in a wide range of activities, categorized as: social and charitable work – providing medical supplies, assisting disadvantaged groups, organizing donations, and distributing aid packages; cultural and educational activities – organizing cultural excursions, running theater groups, folk dance groups, choirs, and offering community lectures; economic initiatives – developing local tourism, writing grants, and income-generating activities. These findings suggest that ministers actively contribute to community-building, cultural preservation, and identity strengthening (both religious and national), alongside their institutionally expected roles. (BÁLINT 2023)

## SUMMARY

This paper begins with the premise that several factors influence changes in ministerial roles: the evolution of church organization, social processes, and the minister's vocational identity. The research primarily focuses on the first factor, examining changes in Unitarian ministerial roles by analyzing the legal framework that regulates ministerial work and status, as well as the competencies that can be acquired during ministerial training. According to the Blizzards model, the ministerial vocation consists of multiple interconnected roles: traditional roles (preacher, teacher, liturgist), neo-traditional roles (pastoral care), and contemporary roles (community organizer, administrator). It can be observed that institutionally expected ministerial roles tend to follow social changes, which, to varying degrees of success, are also reflected in the content and structure of ministerial education. Ministers, in their local congregations, adapt more quickly to

the new needs brought about by societal changes, while the church, as a traditional institution, tends to respond more slowly and rigidly. However, the legal framework governing Unitarian ministerial activities provides some flexibility for ministers to address contemporary challenges within their own scope of work. While traditional ministerial roles (preacher, liturgist, teacher) remain highly regulated, neo-traditional (pastoral care) and contemporary (community organization) roles allow for greater flexibility, offering ministers more room for initiative. As a result, ministers engage in a wide range of activities across different fields. It seems evident that a shift in emphasis can be observed in ministerial roles. In addition to traditional responsibilities, community building, social work, and social responsibility have gained increasing importance. However, ministerial training has yet to fully equip ministers with the necessary competencies for these expanded roles. Although the institutional framework does not explicitly restrict these developments, its structure may inadvertently hinder their implementation.

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