

Transylvanian Hungarian Youth Folk Dance Troupe and Band Visit and New England Tour October 24 - November 5

Background: In April of 2018 a multi-generational group of twenty-seven pilgrims from First Parish in Concord, including four staff members, visited our partner congregation in Székelykeresztúr in the Transylvanian region of Romania.



Over the years we have visited there many times with children, youth and adults, but this was the first time for most of these travelers. As we have always experienced, this introduction to the Hungarian minority culture by our Unitarian partners, with their radical hospitality, made a profoundly deep impression.

One especially transformative interaction occurred when Tim Whitney and his daughter Anna were hosted by Levente Józsa and his wife Annamária Nemes, teachers at the Berde Mózes Unitarian School in Székelykeresztúr. Levente and Annamária are passionate about keeping their ethnic Hungarian folk music and dance culture and traditions alive. As a result, they founded the Vadrózsák (Wild Roses) folk dance troupe and the Lelkes (Enthusiastic) folk music band from among the students they teach at the school.



Above photo: Levente and Annamária (far left) with the Vadrózsák folk dancers

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One evening Levente and Annamária brought the band and a few of the dancers in their colorful traditional clothes to perform in their congregation's garden pavilion, and then teach our group some of their dances. They invited us to come to one of their rehearsals later that week. These experiences of witnessing their efforts to keep alive their centuries-old folk traditions were deeply moving. We wondered "Would it be possible for them to come to visit us and perform in America?"

And so an idea was born, but it felt mostly like a dream. When we returned to Concord we began exploring reality. Was it possible? How many people were necessary? What would it cost? Was our congregation willing to tackle such a huge project? After a few meetings with a core of inspired and dedicated people, we said YES!

Although our First Parish partnership community is strong and has been operational since 1992, we have never attempted anything as ambitious as this. We and our partners first determined that a 17-member dance troupe would work well. We then decided that we could host a total delegation of 25, and we invited our partners to select 8 leaders from their congregation.



Their congregational delegation includes their Senior minister Csaba Tódor and his wife Eva, their music director, 3 religious education teachers and 3 lay leaders.

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The dance troupe consists of Levente, Annamária, a chaperone, 4 band members, and 10 dancers, including 3 children - Csaba and Éva's 2 youngest daughters, and Levente and Annamária's son.

Now the fun began in earnest as we started to plan the itinerary so that the group would get a diverse New England experience, including both our rural mountainous interior and our scenic seacoast, as well as also involving a number of UU congregations around the Boston area and in each of the other locations.

For the possibility of our interior venues, Beth Norton, our music director, and 2019 Cornish award recipient, contacted her sister in the Hanover, New Hampshire / Norwich, Vermont area, as well as former First Parish ministerial interns, Rev. Jan Hutsler in Norwich, VT, and Rev. Paul Sawyer, in Hartland, Vermont. They were all eager to participate.

When planning our seacoast venues, we chose to stay at the Ferry Beach Retreat and Conference Center in Saco, Maine, as we liked the idea of being able to all be together in one place for two nights. Our congregation has a weekend family retreat there each spring, so we were familiar with Ferry Beach and what it can offer. We contacted the nearby Portland and Yarmouth congregations, and asked if they would be involved in creating another special experience involving their congregations. They were enthusiastic and began connecting with each other, as well as with other area folk-dance groups.

The biggest hurdle, of course, was creating a budget for the visit, and a plan for how to fund it. We arrived at the amount of \$36,000 which included airfare, van rentals, two nights at Ferry Beach, and other miscellaneous items.



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We held a major fundraising event on March 24th called "A Transylvanian Extravaganza" featuring dinner, singing, a performance and instruction by Dénes Takácsy (a local Hungarian folk dancer and teacher), reflections by last year's travelers, and a video of the dance troupe and band performing and introducing themselves.

We sent invitations to the fundraiser to everyone ever connected to our partnership community, which included donors to our student scholarship program at the school in Keresztúr, people who have traveled to Transylvania, other neighboring congregations with Transylvanian partnerships, members of the congregation, and the local Hungarian community.

By the end of that evening we raised slightly over \$12,000 and that, combined with our nest egg of previous donations to our pilgrimage assistance fund, brought the total to almost \$21,000. We applied for and received a \$500 travel grant from the UUPCC, and donations continue to be received from the First Parish congregation.

We hope that we will be able to raise additional funds from several performances during the fall visit. The dance group and band are scheduled to perform their folk dances and then teach the audiences at UU congregations in Concord and Belmont, Massachusetts and Portland, Maine, the Ferry Beach Retreat and Conference Center in Saco, Maine, and Tracy Hall in Norwich, Vermont.

We hope you might be moved and inspired to join us at one of those performances and meet this extraordinary group of Transylvanian youth.

For more information about dates and venues see our First Parish Partnership Page at <http://bit.ly/fp-pcc>.



We hope you will consider contributing any amount to help bring this group here. Members of our congregation are able to travel to Keresztúr far more frequently than our partners are able to visit us. Let's give these youth, children, and adults an experience they will never forget. We have started a Faithify campaign to help us raise the rest of the needed funds. To donate, please go to www.faithify.org and search for our project. Once the Faithify campaign is closed, donations can be made on our partnership page at <http://bit.ly/fp-pcc>.

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