

FIELD SOCIAL WORK WITH ROMA AND THE NEED FOR MISSIONARY WORK IN THE MARGINALIZED ROMA COMMUNITY

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Abstract:

The aim is to point out the need for social field work and Roma missions in Slovakia. The article will be a testimony of the social catch-up of Roma communities and religious closeness. How religious are the people living in the Roma community and how much God influences their lives. Of course, I also observe Roma groups in various social situations with a professional eye. Where social field work is needed and where church-congregational assistance is needed in disadvantaged settlements.

Keywords: religion. the church. Roma mission. field social work. integration. social worker. diakon.

Introduction

By Roma mission, we understand a mission from God, in which a person living by faith becomes a witness and a tool of the Holy Spirit in building God's kingdom among the Roma. The goal of the Roma mission is the same as in any other mission field, to lead people to Christ, based on their circumstances but,

most importantly, on the person.¹

Churches should take on a much greater role, not only in philanthropy, education, and catching up with missed opportunities but also in the area of faith. It has been shown in many places that the bond of faith can be a support for Roma communities in difficult situations.²

Through the apostolic constitution *Pastor Bonus*, John Paul II entrusted the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Travelers with the task of providing “effective and proper spiritual care, through suitable pastoral structures, to refugees and exiles, as well as to migrants, nomads, and circus artists.” Thus, the Church believes that a specific pastoral care aimed at the evangelization and human development of Roma is necessary.³

The Slovak Republic is a multi-ethnic country, where approximately 20% of the population are minorities. The second largest group, after the majority population who identified themselves as Slovak, were those who first identified as Roma (34.3%; 19,000 inhabitants).⁴ Although the legislation and conditions are the same for all ethnic minorities, the truth is that the majority of society perceives the Roma as the most diverse ethnic group. The perception of “Roma distinctiveness” has reached such a level that today people speak of the “Roma problem.” As many social studies point out, anti-Roma sentiments are growing in Slovak society, largely because the Slovak population holds a predominantly negative image of the Roma, labeling them as “lazy” and “non-conforming.” A lack of information also manifests in the formulation of opinions about Roma religiosity. Like the majority population, most Roma in Slovakia identify as Catholic. While almost all Roma are considered believers, they rarely attend church services. In fact, a large portion of the Roma community does not lead an active religious life or participate in religious ceremonies. These phenomena are sometimes seen as voluntary expressions of “Roma religiosity” (“religiosity without the Church”). Therefore, many tend to interpret Roma religiosity as formal.⁵

In the past, churches focused on majority groups, and after the regime

- 1 TÓTH Zsuzsanna. Egy lépéssel közelebb, A cigánymisszió megközelítése formái. (O krok bližšie, formy prístupu k rómskej misii) Komárno, K-PRINT Komárno, 2015, p. 36.
- 2 DEBRECZENI József. Ne bánts d a cigányt! Politikai vitairat. Debrecen, (Neubližuj cigánovi! Politický diskusný dokument) Kapitális Nyomdaipari Kft, 2014, p. 247.
- 3 JÁN Pavol II. Apoštolská konštitúcia Pastor bonus. In Kódex kánonického práva. KBS, Bratislava 1996, 150, p. 731.
- 4 AUTORSKÝ KOLEKTÍV. Sčítanie obyvateľov, domov a bytov 2021. Národná analytická správa. Štatistický úrad Slovenskej republiky. 2023, p. 51.
- 5 PODILINSKA Tatiana, HRUŠTIČ Tomáš: Boh medzi bariérami, Sociálna inklúzia Rómov náboženskou cestou. Bratislava, Ústav etnológie SAV, 2010, pp. 16.-17.

change in 1989, systematic pastoral care of the Roma began. The activities were mostly focused on common prayers, spiritual discussions, singing, and religious instruction of children. The processes leading to a new mission paradigm are not only related to the transformation of the universal church. There are also significant global factors and processes that shape the context of the Church's mission.⁶ Today, the Roma mission in Slovakia can be found in almost every church. This is supported by the new EU Strategic Framework for Roma Equality, Inclusion, and Participation.⁷ However, church collaborators carry out their work with diligence, perseverance, and strength drawn from Christ. I personally was part of this great work between 2018 and 2020, where we tried to be as diverse and flexible as possible in southern Slovakia, with support from the Swiss Protestant Church Fund.⁸

Roma living in this region represent a double minority – both Hungarian and Roma. This cultural-linguistic specificity creates a unique local world in which mission work takes place. In the friendly and creative environment of the Roma mission, one can observe a harmonious relationship between success and pastoral care and the preservation of Roma heritage. For me personally, the encounter with the Roma mission was very pleasant and mentally healing. I am glad that Roma children have the opportunity to grow up in the community and cultural richness maintained and cultivated by the Roma mission workers.

Unfortunately, there are many cases where local churches are unwilling to work with the Roma and have the power to stop local initiatives and activities linked with other churches. The Church must understand that its mission is to participate in the Holy Trinity. This mission has a communal character: the mission of God's people. Missiology must be rooted in the Gospel, in God's word. At the same time, one cannot ignore the age and geographic location in which they live.⁹ Therefore, the role of the field social worker in marginalized Roma communities is important in Slovakia.

A few notes on field social work in the Roma community. Most Roma in

6 Cf. GOHEEN W. Michael: *Introducing Christian Mission Today: Scripture, History, and Issues*, IVP Academic, 2014.

7 Communication from the commission to the european parliament and the council A Union of Equality: EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation, 2020. 99cc0720-68c2-4300-854f-592bf21dceaf_en (europa.eu)

8 In nine countries, HEKS (Hilfswerk der evangelischen Kirchen Schweiz) supports the diaconal organizations of the Reformed Churches in their social commitment to disadvantaged people, be it the sick, the elderly, the disabled, minorities or refugees. Community partnerships also support the exchange of knowledge and experience between Switzerland and Eastern Europe. Was wir tun | HEKS, Regionalprogramm Osteuropa | HEKS

9 Cf. GOHEEN W. Michael: *Introducing Christian Mission Today: Scripture, History, and Issues*, IVP Academic, 2014.

Slovakia, about 53.5%, live in ethnic communities. Not all Roma are legally poor. They are as diverse as the Roma population itself. Individual Roma groups differ significantly in terms of living standards, appearance, language, and many other aspects. The lives of residents in marginalized Roma communities can generally be characterized as living in long-term, sometimes lifelong, social exclusion. On the fringes of society, in a low quality of life, their opportunities are limited. Addressing social problems is complicated by the insufficient explanation of their causes, the breakdown of majority-minority relationships, and discrimination against minorities in various areas of society. Marginalized Roma communities are ethnically homogeneous, and in Slovakia, we do not know of other similar communities.

However, this does not mean that life in these communities is uniquely “Roma.” We do not know how ethnic origin affects the lifestyle of Roma community residents, but the connections between their socio-cultural background and social-structural adaptation, concentrated poverty, social exclusion, and disadvantage, stretching back into the past, are also clear. Therefore, it is questionable how a social worker should manage to accept the different ethnic identity of their client. Not all clients identified by social workers as Roma want to present themselves as such, and their ethnicity should be approached sensitively in personal relationships. An insensitive approach can lead to misunderstandings in the relationship between the social worker and the client. The approaches used in social work with Roma clients have little to do with their ethnic identity.¹⁰

Field social work is not defined as a specialized field in the law on social work in Slovakia, but it is expected to be included in the future. Therefore, we consider social work in the client’s natural environment to be field social work, and in this sense, we use the term field social work.¹¹

Today, it is increasingly relevant to talk about the necessity of field social work in Roma communities. The current form of field social work is financed by the European Social Fund,¹² all under the supervision of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, and Family in the National Project program, which focuses on marginalized Roma communities¹³ and the homeless. Support for activating people’s potential for positive changes in housing, education, employment,

10 Cf. MANN, Arne B. Rómsky dejepis, Kalligram, 2000.

11 ONDRUŠKOVÁ Helena, PRUŽINSKÁ Jana. Štandardy terénnej sociálnej práce a terénnej práce v sociálne vylúčených komunitách. Bratislava, 2015, p. 6.

12 European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) - Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion - European Commission (europa.eu)

13 According to the Act on Social Services 448/2008, it uses the label in the case of living in a spatially segregated, concentrated and generationally reproducing place burdened with poverty.

and social inclusion. In the long term, however, it is necessary to explore other strategic aspects to ensure continuity without the help of the European Social Fund. In field social work, the social worker cooperates with other actors of social assistance and social development operating in the environment.

Field social work also includes activities not directly related to solving the social problems of an individual (family, group, or community) but indirectly affecting the achievement of field social work goals, so-called related activities. Field social work, according to the standard for social workers, is a professional activity that is usually carried out in the person's natural environment (home, community, open space) and focuses on preventing social exclusion. Its purpose is to facilitate life, accompany difficult life situations, and mitigate the consequences of poor social conditions: poverty and social exclusion. It is characterized by direct social work with people, carried out in the context of their primary environment (family or other close social relationships). It is focused on people, respects their needs, proposes solutions, and builds on their capabilities and the mobilization of their inner strength. Field social work primarily focuses on working with individuals and their social environment (family, group, community), but it goes beyond their boundaries in activities aimed at developing the locality/community, advocating for the rights and interests of target groups at the local level.¹⁴

As Goheen writes in his book, in the 21st century, we do not need to travel thousands of kilometers to other countries and continents, as was necessary after the discovery of America. Christian mission can be introduced where we live, where clients live. It can be in pubs, other social facilities, with family, at the office, and other institutions, in sports, or leisure activities. However, it is most often carried out on the street. Social and missionary work in the field is irreplaceable in providing effective help to people. It is irreplaceable because it fixes and solves problems where they arise. It offers help in a natural environment and can help clients avoid other forms of care that may have negative consequences. High-quality social work can draw attention to the emergence of problems, mobilize forces to solve them, and uncover possibilities for help from the beginning of the problem.

Conclusion

Religious change also leads to social changes, shaping social habits and individual behaviors. Conversion has great potential for social inclusion. As the

14 Cf. ONDRUŠKOVÁ Elena, PRUŽINSKÁ Jana. *Štandardy terénnej sociálnej práce a terénnej práce v sociálne vylúčených komunitách*. Bratislava, 2015.

number of converted Roma grows, so does the effectiveness of positive social skills and competencies. If Roma join local religious groups, it changes the character and quality of their social networks and they become a significant social capital. Of course, change is ideal when it occurs on a community/collective level.

It is fortunate that at many colleges and universities in the Slovak Republic, students have the opportunity to choose subjects like diakonia (church social work, from which social work as a scientific discipline originates), missiology, or social care.

Almost all universities teaching social work do not overlook the religious-holistic context. One great example is our university, which forms both mind and heart: in the spirit of Catholic moral, intellectual, and academic tradition, it provides university education and research for the integral development of man and the good of society as a whole.¹⁵

We can conclude that this “religious path” can be an extremely effective tool for the social inclusion of Roma in Slovakia.

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