

Hungary returns churches, but most are in bad shape

by [Jonathan Luxmoore](#) in the [October 18, 2011](#) issue

A Hungarian church leader has welcomed the fulfillment of state pledges to restore church properties to religious communities six decades after they were confiscated by the country's communist regime. "This is the only area of church-state relations which has gone well in recent years. The process was transparent and well managed," said Zoltan Tarr, general secretary of the Reformed Church of Hungary.

Refurbishing the neglected or ruined buildings is the downside, however. "While it's been important spiritually and emotionally for local communities to get back buildings they constructed with their own money, they weren't well looked after, and the vast majority are now in poor shape. Refurbishing them to modern needs will pose a heavy burden on the churches."

The Calvinist pastor was speaking as the center-right government of premier Viktor Orbán prepared to complete handover of the properties or pay compensation for those still in state hands by the end of the year.

Tarr said in a mid-September interview that procedures for returning church properties had been "very precisely set out" in the early 1990s. He added, however, that the restitution process covered only church assets used for public services. Churches would continue to rely on state subsidies until the future of communist-seized church lands was also negotiated.

"It isn't right, in theory, for the state to support the churches, but we can't manage without this since the assets which sustained our social activities were taken away," Tarr said.

"It's unlikely churches like ours will get back all of these assets, and it doesn't want them anyway, since times have changed and this isn't how churches function now. We have precise records of what we owned, and it should feature in discussions about future state financing."

Hungarian churches submitted ownership claims to around 7,000 confiscated properties after the 1989 collapse of communist rule. Under a 1997 treaty with the Vatican, the Roman Catholic Church, which owned a third of all arable land before 1948, was to receive back properties up to a value of \$462 million by the end of 2011.

Similar arrangements were reached with the Reformed Church of Hungary and other denominations. The treaty also allowed church schools to receive the same subsidies as their state-owned counterparts, and church members to assign 1 percent of taxes to their denomination, with annual donations topped up by the government.

Tarr said many church communities had counted on reopening schools and mission activities in their original buildings, but he added that many had been handed back "practically ruined," often with even their windows and wiring removed.

"Some communities were wise enough to ask not for the buildings but the equivalent value in money instead," said the Reformed Church general secretary. "In some cases, though, the attachment was so strong they desperately wanted the original properties. These will now need a lot of church money" for maintenance.
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