

# In recession-hit Hungary, churches take over state schools

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Warsaw, Poland, September 8 (ENInews)--Local government officials in Hungary are handing state-owned schools over to churches, unable to afford their upkeep during the economic recession, according to church sources.

"Churches are entitled to run schools in Hungary as public service providers, receiving the same taxpayers' money as public sponsors," said Balazs Odor, ecumenical officer of Hungary's Reformed Church, in an interview with ENInews.

"The school system has its own problems here, which affect church-run schools as well. However, it's generally true that the wellbeing of church schools is better looked after since each has a community behind it," he added.

Hungary's Heti Valasz weekly newspaper reported this summer that local councils had been forced to abandon schools in the face of shrinking state subsidies, heavy municipal debts and a decreasing number of children, adding that more than 60 had been given to religious associations in recent months.

Odor told ENInews that the church's governing Synod Council had issued guidelines in February, requiring local congregations to "study each case carefully" and obtain approval for school acquisitions from church leaders.

"There've been discussions with the state, where our church committed itself to be cautious and reserved in its approach," he told ENInews.

"Congregations have not only to consider the financial resources which have to be secured for a takeover. They must also guarantee the spiritual capacity and potential of the community needed for such an enterprise and study the attitude of concerned parties, such as parents, in advance."

The Reformed, Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches ran most schools in Hungary before the imposition of communist rule after World War II, when 3,750 church schools were taken over by the state and 4,500 teachers forced to resign, leaving only a handful of colleges in church hands.

In April, the premier Viktor Orban's center-right government steered through a new national constitution that states Hungarian citizens "recognise the key role of Christianity in upholding the nation." A new religion law in July strengthened the position of mainstream churches when it deprived all but 14 of Hungary's 358 registered churches and religious associations of legal recognition, and required others to re-apply for court registration after parliamentary approval.

Odor said the Reformed church "co-operated loosely" with the 12 other denominations running their own schools, and had been helped by the federal government's sympathetic attitude to Christianity. "The current government places greater emphasis on the Christian heritage ... and this is important in a post-communist country. Even while facing a difficult economic and social situation, it makes efforts to maintain good co-operation with church communities," he said.

In its report, Heti Valasz said many teachers and parents were "unhappy with the changes," adding that the Roman Catholic bishop of Szeged-Csanad, Laszlo Kiss-Rigo, whose diocese was negotiating the handover of schools with 38 local councils, had pledged that no "mandatory religious education" would be imposed on already functioning classes.