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**REPORT ON MY TRIP TO  
THE EMANUEL UNIVERSITY OF ORADEA (ROMANIA)  
March 8-18, 2006**

My twelfth trip to Romania has just been completed, and it offers the occasion to reflect, not just on this trip, but on the changes I have observed in Romania since my first trip eight years ago, in March 1998. First, some details on this trip. As I do every year, I flew to Budapest, Hungary, where I spent a day catching up on sleep and a backlog of schoolwork, and then was picked up and driven into Romania.

**A Hungarian Connection**

On Sunday, I preached for the first time in a Hungarian church, the First Hungarian Baptist Church of Oradea. Dr. Adrian Giorgiov—who is part of the Old Testament team at Emanuel University, where I taught this past week—is one of the pastors there, and so I went there at his kind invitation. Adrian has been teaching at Emanuel for at least a couple of years, and this Romanian-Hungarian connection is good to see. Romania and Hungary are friendly neighbors today, but there have been some tensions between them in the past. After World War I, the Great Powers annexed the Transylvanian portion of eastern Hungary and incorporated it into what is today Romania, leading to lingering bitterness among many Hungarians. (On two different occasions in years past, tour guides I have listened to have pointedly noted this fact.) Many ethnic Hungarians still live in northwestern Romania, and they keep to themselves in many respects. They have their own Hungarian-language churches and schools, for example. A few businesses in this area even post signs in both Romanian and Hungarian. There have not been many opportunities for Romanian and Hungarian Christians to work together, so this connection with Adrian and his church is a fortuitous one. Adrian and his family—his wife Ruth and their two impossibly cute daughters, ages ten and six—took me out to dinner at a nearby restaurant, where we had a delicious meal and delightful conversation.

The church, according to Adrian, is the largest Hungarian Baptist congregation in Romania, and, indeed, perhaps in the world. It has 700-800 members, and is very spiritually vital. The congregation was a healthy mix of people of all ages, and Adrian leads a vibrant youth group there, among other things. It turns out that my Aunt Elisabeth (Elliot) has spoken several times in this church, and several of her books have been translated into Hungarian. This is the largest of four Hungarian Baptist congregations in Oradea, and two of the others are daughter churches of this one, and one of these is a church plant among Gypsies. Romania has probably the world's largest population of Gypsies, and it is heartbreaking to see the hovels in which they live outside of town—filthy little shacks made of twigs and cardboard, mostly. The children seem to get by mainly by begging and stealing, and Romanians typically are harshly dismissive of Gypsies in general. So, it is most encouraging to hear of such a ministry, led by an able Gypsy deacon who became a Christian a few years ago. Adrian promises to take me there in one of my next visits, and I will eagerly look forward to that.

**The Week at Emanuel**

I taught two classes to the Pastoral Theology students during the week. The first was Old Testament Theology I, and the second was an exegesis of Psalms class. The latter group had been my students last year, and it was fun having them again. The results of our curricular meeting last March as an Old Testament team are becoming visible now, and the students are on a well-defined course of study that will prepare them well for the pastorate when they leave. The school is also launching a master's level program, but I do not know many details of this yet. The only down side of things was that I struggled

with laryngitis all week, and finally was unable to teach at all the final two days. But, Dan Botica and I were able to work out a plan for finishing the course, involving readings and online lectures that should accomplish our goals.

My annual comment about the Wednesday chapel time remains true this time: it was a highlight of the week for me. The students sing with a gusto and joy in the Lord that is incredibly moving. This week, a mission team left for a couple of weeks in Turkey, so there was a special report and prayer of commissioning for them in the chapel time. For some of the incredible singing, check out the 15-minute video on Emanuel University that I have posted as a streaming video on the “Romania” page of my Web site ([www.bethel.edu/~dhoward](http://www.bethel.edu/~dhoward)). Rejoice and be moved.

I enjoyed several times with Dan Botica, the full-time Old Testament instructor at Emanuel, and his wife Carmen. On Sunday evening, they had me in for a “light” supper—consisting of four (!) delicious courses of food: appetizers, soup, main dish, and desserts, each one consisting of plates groaning under piles of the most savory offerings. They had me over again for “lunch” on Friday afternoon, another huge layout of great, native Romanian foods. They are a delightful couple, and have two bright and very polite school-age boys. I especially thank the Lord for them, as they spend 12 years in the U.S., where Dan completed B.A., M.Div., and Ph.D. degrees (this last one is almost complete). Too often, people in that situation hear a call to stay in the U.S., and the Church in their native lands thus suffers from a brain drain and a loss of qualified leadership. Dan and I spent many good times together talking about teaching, ministry, family life, and more.

### **Bethel Seminary Student in Oradea: Linda Bergeon**

One of the special delights of this trip was that, for the first time, I was able to come with a student of mine, who will be spending almost three months in Oradea. Linda Bergeon is an M.Div. student at Bethel Seminary, and we worked together for close to a year in preparations for her trip. She is working closely with Greg Meland, Director of Supervised Ministry and Placement, and this trip will count as her Bethel internship. She will be working with the women students at the school, as well as with various women’s groups and youth groups in town. It has been heartening to see the way in which she threw herself enthusiastically into preparations, raising prayer and financial support, learning as much about Romanian culture and history as she could, and, by the time I left, she was fairly well settled in and well on her way to making new friends and leaving a lasting impression behind her. Linda’s son is maintaining a Weblog (blog) for her reflections on her trip, and you can read it at <http://blog.myspace.com/lbergeon>. She plans to stay at Emanuel through its graduation in late May, and then hurry home in time for her own graduation from Bethel in early June.

### **Changes in Romania in the Last Eight Years**

When I first went to Romania in March 1998, I felt like I had stepped back in time hundreds of years, or at least onto the set of “Fiddler on the Roof,” which depicted the hardships of 19<sup>th</sup>-century life in the villages of tsarist Russia. Peasants trudged several miles along the roads between villages. Farmers plowed with mules or oxen. Everything seemed drab and colorless. The legacy of communism’s oppressive hand was still very much in evidence. I could not use a credit card anywhere in Oradea. Romanian money was worthless in any country except Romania; no currency exchange would take it. I am sure that many of my students had no more than 4-5 shirts and 2-3 pair of pants to their name. I was told that a recent article in the *Christian Science Monitor* had stated that Romania was about the only place in Europe where one could step back into the Middle Ages. Following is an excerpt of a letter I wrote in 1999, giving three examples of life in Romania and rural Hungary:

*(1) Early Saturday morning, as we drove out of town in Oradea, a man was pushing a small, wooden wheelbarrow piled high with goods; this was going to convert into his stall at the marketplace, where he'd sell these all day. (2) Along the road in Hungary, another man was pushing a small wheelbarrow, and gathering wood in it from the woods nearby. He was far from any houses or towns, and this was to be the wood for his fire. (3) In a village in Hungary, people set up along the road with huge sacks of potatoes for sale; they looked like 80- or 100-pound bags. One old babushka lady had ridden her bicycle into town and now had slung the big bag of potatoes over the bike and was walking it home.*

There are enormous changes now, eight years later. One can still find pockets of the poverty and hardships I've just described. (The director of the 2003 movie, "Cold Mountain," chose another part of Romania for the location of this movie, since it "looked" very much like life in the U.S. in the 1860s.) But, for the most part, Oradea is beginning to feel like a city in Western Europe. Romania is scheduled to join the European Union in January 2007, and its economy is much stronger than in 1998.

In Oradea, there is a BMW dealership down the road from the school. A Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise is now operating. There are a couple of supermarkets that are essentially just like those in America. There is a small, multi-plex theater complex in town. There is a gas station right by the school. There is a giant store just across the street from the campus that is a combination Home Depot, Walmart, and grocery store (complete with deli), which occupies a full city block. New construction has sprung up all around the school, which, in 1998, was essentially just out of town. The roads are much nicer than before. There are many fewer Dacias (pronounced "Dachas") on the roads; the Dacia was the much-derided "national car" of Romania, something like the East German Trabant, or the Yugoslavian Yugo. Now, many more Western European cars are seen. And, even at the school, where in 1998, there were 5-6 cars at most parked in the parking lot, belonging to the school or a couple of faculty members, today there are more than two dozen, it seems, many of them belonging to students. There is wireless, high-speed Internet and three computer labs in the school. Almost all students have cell phones, and many have laptop computers. Blue jeans are ubiquitous on campus now.

And, there is color! Where once there was only gray, drab concrete buildings, now there are huge colorful billboards, and colorful neon signs marking the many little shops on the main drag near the school. Western-style advertising is everywhere, even for Romanian products. Buildings are being decorated in attractive, colorful ways.

This all made it a much more comfortable trip for me on the "personal comforts" level. I was able to use the Internet any time I needed to. I was able to obtain good foods, if I wanted snacks or to have a meal out. I had real hot water 24 hours a day in my guest room (as opposed the lukewarm water two hours a day previously).

But, all of this makes for many more distractions and temptations for the students. Many come from small towns, where life is still like it was a century ago. The very basic "glitz" even of a city like Oradea can be very overwhelming, and, for some students, seductive. My prayer is that the Christians in Oradea—students, faculty, and laypeople alike—will not lose their spiritual fervor, which is so evident, that they will not succumb to the rampant materialism that overwhelms us in the West. But, I worry, too.

### **Thank-yous**

I again thank Bethel Seminary and Dr. Leland Eliason, Bethel's provost, for releasing me to go to Romania this time. I also thank my colleagues and students who have asked about and prayed about

my trips. I thank Jim Anderson, my teaching assistant, and Scott Strand, Bethel's instructional technology wizard, for making the arrangements for help in maintaining my courses while I was gone. I thank Bethel Seminary's Faculty Cross-Cultural Travel Grant Committee for granting funds that have made this trip possible, along with the Emmanuel Foundation Fund in Wheaton, Illinois. I thank Dr. Paul Negrut, President of Emanuel, for his kindnesses and continuing confidence in me, and also Dan and Carmen Botica, for their outstanding hospitality and many helps rendered. I also thank John and Ann Lenton for their continuing hospitality. And, I thank my wife Jan, who each trip sends me off and is left with responsibilities of home, children, dog, church, and much more, and yet who is very affirming of this ministry.