

# Romanian Baptist Congress

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The 27th Congress of the Romanian Baptist Church was held in Bucharest at Titulescu Church of "Golgotha" from 4-6 February, 1977.

For two days the hotels around the North station in Bucharest were swarming with Romanian Baptists. They had come into the capital from all over the country hoping to attend the Congress. Normally such an assembly should meet every three years, but this one had taken five years to convene. A great deal had happened since 1972. It was an occasion not to be missed.

The Baptist Union had stipulated that 50 delegates from the six Associations of the Baptist Church in Romania (representing an official figure of 160,000 members) would be invited to take a full part in the proceedings, with the opportunity to speak and to vote for the executive of the new Council. Hundreds of others, however, were admitted as guests. They included pastors or leading laymen within the movement as well as representatives from Baptist bodies abroad. In addition, members of the general public were allowed to listen to the Congress proceedings from the gallery. Altogether over 2,000 people were present. So great was the crowd by the end of the first day that the gallery had to be closed for the next sessions so as not to endanger the participants. People therefore sat around upstairs in the church's adjacent rooms listening to loudspeakers which relayed the discussion of the delegates. Some even recorded the speeches on their personal cassette recorders. It was a truly public occasion.

The delegates were quite open in the way they spoke. The first speeches came from the Union officials who strongly criticized certain individuals within the denomination, who, they insisted, had not made their task as leaders any easier. The Congress had been delayed, according to the General Secretary, Pastor Ioachim Tunea, because of the activities of Pastor Josif Ton of Ploiesti. In 1973 he had circulated a paper (see *RCL* Vol. 1, No. 6, 1973, pp. 19-22) criticizing the Union leadership and had thereby created a system of public criticism which Tunea called the "system of open letters". Such action only stirred up factions within

the Church and damaged the name of Baptists in society. That 50 pastors followed Ton's example in no way justified the action. Tunea implied that the Union's negotiations for the removal of certain restrictions had in fact been hindered by Ton.

Another official with a complaint to make was the Director of the Seminary, Dr. Ioan Bunaciu. In 1976 he had faced a protest demonstration by his students who demanded the return of Ton and another pastor, Belicov, to the Seminary staff (see document pp. 101-103). Bunaciu was particularly offended that they had decided to make their grievances public before attempting to settle them with him. He mentioned the adverse effects of their letter which was sent to London and of a protest letter, written by Pastor Pavel Nicolescu on their behalf, which was sent to Radio Free Europe. Nicolescu's action, he said, was neither Biblical nor moral. Radio Free Europe was an organization hostile to Romania. Dr. Bunaciu also mentioned the case of the two students Ionel Prejban and Dimitrie Ianculovic, who had been dismissed at the beginning of the autumn term. They had both been refused the necessary recommendations from their Associations to continue their studies. Dr. Bunaciu insisted that their dismissal and the students' protests were not connected.

Between each of the officials' reports a word of greeting was given by the representatives from abroad. Dr. Gerhard Claas spoke on behalf of the European Baptist Federation and Dr. Denton Lotz for the Southern Baptist Convention. Dr. Claas emphasized the need for forgiveness which does not expect perfection on the part of the recipient of love. He appealed for unity and tried to explain to the delegates the nature of the changes which were taking place within the Baptist world at large. The delegates, he felt, needed such a fresh perspective.

The delegates debated the official reports during the afternoon of the first day until the end of the morning session of the next day. Twenty-one of the 50 delegates asked to speak – all were given an equal opportunity. It was clear from the first speaker, Pastor Pascu Geabo, that the response of the delegates was going to be as uninhibited as the official reports. Pastor Pascu Geabo raised the problem of obtaining official permission for the opening of Affiliations (*i.e.* smaller Baptist gatherings) in the villages. Hundreds had been closed by order of previous Congresses in an attempt to centralize church buildings. This had been more for political than religious reasons. The congregations had continued to meet privately or else had travelled many miles to the nearest service. Geabo also protested at the way permits for extending and repairing church buildings were being delayed.<sup>1</sup> Approval for the alterations was usually given by the Baptist Union and the Department of Cults, but these plans were obstructed by the local authorities. From his own experience at Alexandria, he advised the Congress to appeal directly to President Ceausescu, the Head of State, for his personal intervention.

Other speakers underlined the problems raised by Geabo. Some delegates gave the names of churches where alterations were needed but which after years of petitioning had not been granted permission. Pastor Husan of Cluj acknowledged where approval had been given and construction work begun, but said that many churches were still waiting for permission. He then mentioned a problem which affected mainly the village churches. A previous Union had introduced measures to regulate the times of services throughout the country. These were unsuitable for Baptists in the countryside, whose time schedules were different from those of city and industrial areas. Husan called for greater flexibility in this matter.

A couple of speakers referred to the situation at the Seminary. They supported the students' request that Pastor Ton be brought back to the Seminary staff and asked that the students' point of view be properly considered. But the two dismissed students were not mentioned nor was Bunaciu's reference to Nicolescu's part in the story. Nicolescu himself was present at the Congress, but as he was not a delegate he could not speak.

Pastor Josif Ton made his speech at the end of the first day. He introduced a new area of discussion. Although he accepted that the matters he was to raise were more political than religious, he felt that something had to be said. He read a paper about the fining of Baptist groups by the local police. Many of the groups were Affiliations without an official meeting place. The fines amounted to a considerable sum. Pastor Ton condemned the legal basis for such police action: Baptists were being fined under law No. 153 of the Penal Code which dealt with illegal acts of vandalism, hooliganism and anarchism. He produced a minor shock wave through the assembly by offering as documentary evidence a police statement about a Baptist group from Vrancea which had been fined for "singing illegal religious songs". The songs in question came from the official Baptist hymn-book. Ton also provided evidence of discrimination against Baptist children in school and at university and called for an end to such an infringement of rights. He believed that these cases did not represent the State's attitude towards the Baptists and therefore he particularly asked that higher authorities look into abuses by local organs. In fact, at the beginning of his speech, Ton mentioned a conversation which he had had with the Inspector of Cults for Bucharest (who was personally present in the Congress Hall): the latter had said that the authorities were not aware of any infringements of Baptists' rights and would certainly appreciate hearing about such incidents. To end, Ton expressed his opposition to plans for investigating the possible entry of the Romanian Baptist Church into the World Council of Churches. The Evangelical Alliance, in his opinion, would be a more appropriate body for the Baptist Church to join. Later, in his reply to the

delegates, the General Secretary, Mr. Tunea, denied that the Union had done anything other than look at the proposal.

Another important speech was made by Vasile Talos, pastor of the Mihai Bravu Church in Bucharest (see document pp. 103-104). Using his university training in law, he analyzed the legal position of the denomination. Although Romanian Baptists were living in a State which promoted the atheist concept of life, nevertheless, he said the Constitution defended the rights of believers. He then quoted speeches by the country's President, Nicolae Ceausescu, which revealed the President's concern for legality in the affairs of State: Ceausescu had said that nothing should take the place of the law of the land. It followed, therefore, Vasile Talos stated, that Baptists had the right and duty to pursue their activities according to their Statutes which in 1951 had become laws of the land. Talos emphasized that the Statutes upheld the autonomy of the individual church and concentrated the supreme authority of the Baptist Church in the Congress. He asked, therefore, that the Statutes be observed more closely and that the Congress play its proper role in the denomination.

A vote should have been taken on the proposals of the 21 speakers, but as each had proposed two or three motions the number of items made it impossible to carry out this part of the agenda. So it was left to the Secretary General to reply. His main concern was to indicate that the various infringements of rights, especially the fines referred to by Pastor Ton, were few in number. Other items were left on the Congress table.<sup>2</sup> Most areas of concern had been mentioned publicly: the lack of good literature for children and young people; the scarcity of the Biblical calendar, especially for the Hungarian Baptists; the wish for the Seminary to be raised to the academic level of a university institute and for its students to be sent abroad to study; the desire that pastors be transferred more easily and that the Romanian press stop denigrating Baptists.

The elections to the new Union executive formed the climax of the Congress. At this point an intriguing division took place. For the Presidency there were 27 votes to 23 in favour of the interim President, Cornel Mara. The delegates of the three more conservative Associations (Arad, Brasov and Timisoara) numbered 27 whilst those from Cluj, Oradea and Bucharest 23. It appears therefore that the former three joined forces as did the latter. Two delegates from the latter group, Pavel Barbatei and Vasile Talos,<sup>3</sup> were voted into the executive as General Secretary and his assistant. Two Vice-Presidents were elected for the Romanian and Hungarian Baptists: Traian Grecu and Mike Bela. The remaining places on the executive of the Union were filled by Bunaciu, the re-elected Director of the Seminary, and Tunea, head of publications and protocol, who took the place of Pastor Liviu Olah on the Council. (The latter had been removed from his pastorate before the Congress by the authorities because he had intended to hold an unauthorized baptism.<sup>4</sup>) Both received a good majority of votes.

Fifteen men, the majority of them new in the Union Council, now have the difficult task of implementing the will of the Congress so freely expressed in the debate. It is to be hoped that the tensions within the denomination which existed before the Congress will have been reduced by such a frank discussion. The cause of such tension may well lie with the State and its attitude towards the young people in the Baptist Church. On the other hand, a source of unrest may also lie with the young Romanian Baptists. They need to see beyond their own personal issues and to have the patience to allow their new leaders to mark out a fresh path for the Church over the next three years.

<sup>1</sup> According to the Secretary General, the Church had enjoyed an annual increase of 20,000 converts since 1972. Such growth among congregations obviously created the need for more space.

<sup>2</sup> It was decided that the proposals would be considered in December (1977) at a special Congress at which the Union would report back to the delegates.

<sup>3</sup> According to recent information, Vasile Talos's election to the Union's executive has not been recognized by the Department of Cults.

<sup>4</sup> In a report published in the *European Baptist Press Service* (14 February, 1977, p. 4) Dr. Gerhard Claas stated that considerable ground had been covered in his talks with the Romanian state authorities about the baptism and membership of new converts. They had agreed that baptism and membership would not be equated with proselytism and a mere change of confession [the law does not allow a Romanian to change his confession]. Such an agreement may help ease both inter-church and church-state relations in the future.

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*As an appendix to Alan Scarfe's report (pp. 94-98) we print four documents written by Romanian Baptists which convey some of the controversies which preceded the Congress of February 1977. The Congress had been delayed for over 12 months and a great deal of tension had built up within the denomination during that year. The major cause of contention stemmed from the suspicion felt by several churches that the old leadership were unwilling to relinquish their power. In fact, few of them had been re-elected for a further term of office in the regional elections held as long ago as December 1975. In addition, the State had refused to recognize the newly elected candidates. This situation of tension came to a head in the autumn of 1976 when two students from the Baptist Seminary in Bucharest were dismissed. Many Baptists felt that the two students had been victims of a Union attempt to prove its own authority. It was time, many felt, for the new leadership to take over. Ed.*