The most dangerous preacher in Hungary

Methodist leader Gábor Iványi is perhaps Viktor Orbán’s fiercest critic. He’s looking to Americans for solidarity.

by Marc Roscoe Loustau in the December 2024 issue
Published on September 25, 2024

Hungarian Methodist pastor Gábor Iványi in 2021 (Gabriella Barbara / Alamy Live News)

On Sundays, the most dangerous preacher in Hungary worships in a sleepy bedroom community in north Budapest. Gábor Iványi, leader of a small Hungarian Methodist denomination, speaks from a floor-level lectern at the House of Reconciliation, an unassuming A-frame sanctuary on a leafy cul de sac. On a damp morning last

winter, I traveled 40 minutes from downtown to hear Iványi preach about a recent inflection point in his ongoing conflict with Hungary's right-wing authoritarian government.

Iványi has led his Methodist denomination, the 20,000-member Hungarian Evangelical Fellowship (MET), since the 1970s. Membership remains low in the country's various Methodist groups, founded as missionary churches in the 19th century. Yet Methodism is a stubborn presence in Hungary, especially after facing early opposition from official state churches. "Methodism was one of the early forces pushing for religious freedom in many European countries," writes David Scott, director of mission theology at the United Methodist Church's General Board of Global Ministries.

This history has come full circle, with Hungary's Methodist MET struggling to worship freely, albeit now under a virulently Christian nationalist regime. In 2011 Viktor Orbán's government passed a law reducing the number of officially recognized religious groups from 358 to 14. Overnight, the MET and hundreds of other groups lost their "registered" status and were no longer eligible to receive government funding for charitable work.

In 2014 the MET received international news coverage when it won a judgment from the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. The publicity helped make Iványi into the public face of Christian dissent against Orbán's corrupt and xenophobic system, which demonizes minorities and refugees while Orbán's friends enrich themselves from public funds. In December 2019, outraged at Orbán's claim to be defending "Christian freedom," MET leaders along with other dissident Hungarian Christians released an Advent Declaration, a statement of theological principle that included paragraphs in support of welcoming refugees and LGBTQ rights. The *New York Times* commented on Iványi's "near mythical status" in Hungary, and PRX's *The World* called him "one of Orbán's fiercest critics."

But since the European court's judgment, Orbán has ramped up his harassment campaign against the MET. In 2022, officers of Hungary's tax authority raided the offices of an MET charity. On trumped-up charges of social security fraud, the government has continued to withhold funds.

In October 2023 the MET held a press conference to announce layoffs. Within weeks it had closed shelters for homeless Hungarians. This past August, the government

withdrew operating licenses for MET schools and other charitable institutions, further weakening the church's ability to do its work.

When I visited last December, Iványi addressed his congregation's despair about what, in the sermon, he called "government persecution of Christians." Iványi preached gently, sometimes using an intimate whisper, while leaning his elbow on his simple wooden lectern. Even his pastoral message belied my inadvertent mental typecasting based on his bearlike frame and ponderous gait.

"Don't throw away your faith in hard times," he counseled. "Don't treat faith like it's a piece of garbage." The MET has one of the classic portraits of John Wesley on its website's landing page, and Iványi seemed to be applying a classic Wesley exhortation: "Stay in love with God."

The assumption that went unsaid for Iványi's congregants, steeped as they are in the MET's social service mission, is that social service *is* faith. "MET is known, fundamentally, for being on the side of the poor," MET spokesperson Eszter Gerendás told the independent *Balkan Insight* news outlet in 2022. For the MET, a Methodist-style adorational, loving faith in God is equivalent to loving the poor.

I was struck by Iványi's caring concern for his congregants' relationship with their faith. His message suggested that solidarity with the poor is more than a matter of public reputation, as Gerendás suggested. The government's move against the MET might produce a crisis of belief—a reason to cast off one's faith—because the government is dismantling the church's institutional means for loving God.

After the service, Iványi invited members to join me for a group conversation in the parish's wood-paneled parish hall. Iványi sat next to me at the center of a hand-carved table. This lion of the resistance to Christian authoritarianism, to my surprise, was also insecure. He apologized and explained away the low turnout: "Since the pandemic, so many people watch online." Endearingly, Europe's foremost Christian dissident, an intellectual champion of religious freedom, was preoccupied like other pastors with worship attendance.

At the table, I wanted to know how his congregants understood the church's situation—and how American Christians could be of use in their struggle.

Dávid, who asked that I use only his first name, insisted that the focus should not be on church members themselves. "Government propaganda tries to make it look like

it’s about us,” he said, “but at the same time they intentionally do not want to care for society’s most oppressed.”

Judit Kozma, a social worker, disagreed and noted that the MET could cease to exist: “We need help now because we would like to survive. We hope that with help and collaboration perhaps we can reveal something about the current difficult situation. But for that, people have to get to know us.”

Iványi jumped in with his judgment that American Christians have not taken the MET’s struggle seriously.

“Americans believe that there is no need to shoulder the responsibility of solidarity with Christians here because we are European Union citizens and we live in a Christian country. But we know that it’s all smoke and mirrors.”

American mainline Christians, he continued, suffer from halcyon misconceptions about the European Union. While Americans might know that Hungary is violating religious freedoms—despite being an EU member—they also have misplaced confidence that the EU will protect religious freedom. The EU, with its constitutions, court systems, and expansive declarations of human rights, has not prevented what is actually unfolding before our eyes in Hungary: the persecution of liberal Christians and the violation of their religious freedom.

“This authoritarianism has come to America, too,” Iványi continued, “and if they begin to abuse Christians there, then we will absolutely support you. We will shoulder the task of building community with you, because that’s what solidarity means.”

For Hungarian Methodists outside the MET, Iványi is indeed a dangerous person to know. I had difficulty finding a Methodist leader willing to speak on the record about Iványi. Some denied any relationship with the MET. Others answered, apropos of an invitation to talk about Iványi, that they have no issues with the Hungarian government, as if they wanted to send a message not to me but to whomever else might be listening on the line.

“Gábor Iványi’s supporters, they’ve been sanctioned, too,” explained Ildikó Mislai. “There were state sanctions against them. Every other church has been terrorized and silenced.”

I was finally able to interview László Khaled, superintendent of Hungary's United Methodist Church, early on a Monday morning in the Hungarian UMC's Budapest headquarters. He popped eagerly out of his office and ushered me into a quiet library with windows onto a wood-and-steel, auditorium-style sanctuary. Besides administrative offices, he said while pointing through the glass, the building houses archives, guest rooms, and a dormitory for college students.

Elsewhere in Hungary, the UMC runs homes for the elderly and primary schools, for which the church receives significant state subsidies as one of the churches currently on the list of government-recognized religious groups. These are the same subsidies that the government has been withholding from the MET since it was scratched from the list in 2011.

Khaled said that in the 1980s, Iványi led a faction out of Hungary's UMC—a group that became the MET—when Iványi began complaining about the Communist regime's interference in church life. I pressed him to explain why the split should justify the Hungarian UMC's current arm's-length approach to Iványi. In response, he commented abstractly for a while on several "fascinating" dissertations published about the history of Hungarian Methodism.

Hungarian Wesleyan groups joined together in the Wesley Theological Alliance in 1998, while Khaled has been president since 2015. "But Iványi's group isn't a member," he pointed out. He blamed the MET for not cooperating. "The MET goes its own road," he observed. Khaled said he had tried to help the MET, in this alliance role, although this claim was directly contradicted by MET members' own statements.

Khaled also opined on the "very interesting questions regarding church-state relations" posed by the Hungarian government's 2011 law. He praised Orbán's signature policy to reduce the number of recognized religious groups. "As a Methodist minister, I see it as a change for the good," he said. "There should only be one Methodist church in Hungary."

"We aren't here to run institutions," Khaled said by way of distancing himself from what he called the MET's overemphasis on social service programs. "Jesus didn't say, 'Build schools, found hospitals.' No, we have a spiritual mission."

Khaled did note that, at the beginning of our interview, he had told me proudly about his own social service institutions. He shrugged off the contradiction, saying

that it’s just the way things are done in Hungary, although, he added, “it’s quite unique in Europe.”

Dissent, wrote the Czech playwright Václav Havel in his famous essay “The Power of the Powerless,” “is a natural and inevitable consequence of the present historical phase of the system it is haunting.” Havel’s damning account of 1980s Communism, “a system so thoroughly permeated with hypocrisy and lies,” could work as a description of Orbán’s government today: “It pretends to respect human rights. It pretends to persecute no one. It pretends to fear nothing. It pretends to pretend nothing.”

Havel, who died in 2011, became the first president of the Czech Republic after the fall of Communism. A decade before, with the illegal publication of “The Power of the Powerless,” he had become the moral conscience of his country’s anti-Communist opposition. But he wrote this essay to make sense of the government’s repressive response to individual artists. Why, for example, did the USSR mobilize its entire repressive legal structure against writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn? Solzhenitsyn posed no threat of military force, commanded no followers, and led no political party. Havel said it was because he insisted on living in the truth, an attitude that threatens a system of falsehood to its core.

Reporters often note that Iványi was once close to Viktor Orbán. Iványi baptized two of the current prime minister’s children and presided over the ceremony when Orbán and his wife renewed their wedding vows. The change from intimates to enemies has encouraged speculation about Orbán’s idiosyncratic, personal reasons for persecuting the MET.

The turnabout bothers Iványi’s parishioners, too. Church organist Zoltán told me to see it through the lens of the MET’s struggle. “It shows the absurdity of the situation,” he explained, “since it’s Orbán’s government that’s disputing whether we’re a church, whether Gábor is a pastor.”

I find Havel’s analysis so compelling because I think Hungary’s authoritarian government will go after Iványi regardless—even if Iványi has no homeless shelters or schools left, even if he has no institutional basis for mobilizing an anti-government opposition.

Iványi is the individual who, in Havel’s telling, threatens the system by his choice to live in the truth. Under the orderly surface of the life of lies, Havel insists that there

is a hidden sphere of truthfulness. Systematic mendacity is profoundly vulnerable to the power of living according to the authentic demands of one's own self, which Havel equates with artistic freedom, creativity, and expression. It is this hidden resource that anti-Communist dissidents tapped into.

"He has upset the power structure by tearing apart what holds it together," Havel writes. "He has demonstrated that living a lie is living a lie."

Havel tells us to be less fascinated by the individual personalities at the top levels of power. The system of lies holds together because of citizens' banal yet mutually reinforcing decision-making. Everyone who goes along to get along is an object in a system of control.

"But at the same time they are its subjects as well," Havel writes. "They are both victims of the system and its instruments."

Havel's essay, with his insistence on living on the basis of life's own aims, is tone-deaf to a Christian theological justification for dissent. Christian dissidents like Iványi are motivated to incarnational service with the poor. They worship not life in itself but rather the life that God, in God's otherness and love, has incarnated for us. This is the essence of solidarity in the incarnational struggle against injustice. Indeed, both Iványi and his parishioners speak of standing in solidarity with the oppressed. Iványi's dissidence is certainly influenced by liberation theology, especially the principle of God's preferential option for the poor, as well as the idea that God is a suffering God present with the marginalized.

The MET's approach to social service is also rooted in charity, however, and parishioners speak about service as much as solidarity. "We want to build the kingdom of God," MET parishioner Judit insisted, "through service to the poorest of the poor."

This sounds more like the social gospel than liberation theology. American Christians, steeped in our post–liberation theology worldviews, might hear a note of paternalism.

But dissidence—Christian dissidence, too—is also a sui generis tradition: in Havel's words, a consequence of the system it is haunting. Dissidents like Iványi certainly have multiple influences, but critique should also take shape after we understand their struggle to live in the truth amid Hungary's false Christian nationalism.

The MET's Hungarian critics say that there are plenty of charitable institutions in Hungary, including shelters and schools run by Christian churches (with the generous government funding denied to the MET). If the MET's institutions shut down, church members (and clients) can simply move on to the next open door.

But this loses sight of the bigger picture: the Hungarian government should not be in the position to dictate how the MET—or any church, for that matter—chooses to worship God. If members of the MET have decided, over 50 years of prayerful service, that God desires them to encounter God's presence in the MET's own charitable institutions, schools, and shelters, then it is discrimination when the government takes action to shut these institutions down.

Iványi's struggle also poses broader questions about what kinds of koinonia relationships Christians should cultivate at a time when even some liberals demand that we focus on "taking care of our own problems at home."

As I talked with Iványi and other MET members, I began to understand a central truth in what he was saying about American churches who might otherwise have been inclined to support him but have so far shown little solidarity with the MET's struggle, even with all the publicity and a decision from Europe's highest court. That truth is that we often assume that the EU shares our human rights agenda, and therefore we believe that a church like the MET will be protected.

The historical cause of this halcyon belief lies in the post–World War II period, when liberal Protestant internationalists led the way in making religious freedom a basic human right. Mainline leaders like Lutheran theologian Frederick Nolde had their fingerprints all over the UN's 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In turn, the declaration was a key source for the drafters of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

If anyone were going to suffer discrimination, we might think, it would be liberal Protestants' religious others, those who fell outside Nolde's mid-20th-century liberal Christian worldview. For the last 70 years, we've believed that if there was a problem with Europe's human rights regime, liberal Protestantism would be the cause, not the victim.

Havel's famous essay convinced Western intellectuals to listen to dissidents' own accounts of the everyday in a non-democracy. His argument was essentially a call to attend to lived experience. At one point, Havel mocks a hypothetical outside

observer who calls Communism a free society, based only on a study of its constitution and legal code. Communism was not simple, arbitrary, brutal dictatorship, Havel insisted. Communist governments gave lip service to the rule of law, while enacting oppression in every facet of daily life.

American mainline Protestants need Christian intellectuals and dissidents like Gábor Iványi who risk their very worship of God to oppose Christian nationalist regimes. We need them so that we can see Europe as it really is.

There are no dictatorship-style, street-corner assassinations in Hungary today, no arrests and disappearances. Instead, the government just makes it too bureaucratically annoying and expensive for people like Iványi to do the work God has called them to do. It becomes so hard that they close up shop. Either that or keep quiet.

Orbán has not formally gotten rid of Hungary's court system. And Iványi can still appeal to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. But neither is likely to help the MET. Liberal Protestantism is under threat by Hungary's Christian nationalist regime, and Europe's system of human rights protections is powerless to stop it.

It may be difficult for us to imagine, but one of Hungary's liberal Protestant churches is being persecuted. They are also asking American Christians for solidarity. What are we going to do?