



NORDIC AND BALTIC EPISCOPAL AREA

THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

BISHOP CHRISTIAN ALSTED

Copenhagen 7. May 2018

Denmark
Estonia
Finland
Latvia
Lithuania
Norway
Sweden

Dear United Methodists in the Nordic and Baltic Area

In the past week, I was part of a highly prayerful and intensive meeting of the Council of Bishops. Our Christian conferencing was shaped by the desire to help the General Conference to do its work and to help the church find a way forward being in ministry with LGBTQ brothers and sisters.

Coming together as a worldwide church from highly diverse missional and cultural realities, with a multitude of experiences, understandings and practices when it comes to a number matters including human sexuality, is in itself challenging. And though we are united by a common Methodist groundwork, I have never experienced it being more challenging than in the council meeting last week. Conversations were candid and painfully honest. We tried hard to listen and to understand each other, and prayer was at the heart of our work.

The mission, vision and scope of the Committee on a Way Forward guided our discernment to: Design a way for being the church that maximizes the presence of a United Methodist witness. Allow for as much contextual differentiation as possible and while creating as much unity as possible.

At the conclusion of our Christian conferencing the following motion and rationale was approved:

Having received and considered the extensive work of the Commission on a Way Forward, the Council of Bishops will submit a report to the Special Session of the General Conference in 2019 that includes:

- All three plans (The Traditionalist Plan, The One Church Plan and the Connectional Conference Plan) for a way forward considered by the Commission and the Council.
- The Council's recommendation of the One Church Plan.
- An historical narrative of the Council's discernment process regarding all three plans.

Rationale:

In order to invite the church to go deeper into the journey the Council and Commission has been on, the Council will make all the information considered by the Commission and the Council of Bishops available to the delegates of the General Conference and acknowledges there is support for each of the three plans within the Council. The values of our global church are reflected in all three plans. The majority of the Council recommends the One Church Plan as the best way forward for The United Methodist Church.

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The Council does not release the vote totals, however I can say that the vote to bring all three plans and to recommend the One Church Plan was overwhelming.

The One Church plan provides conferences, churches, and pastors the flexibility to reach their missional context while retaining the connectional nature of The United Methodist Church. The One Church Plan removes the restrictive language regarding homosexuality in the Book of Discipline and gives United Methodists the ability to address different missional contexts in ways that reflect their theological convictions. Furthermore, it adds assurances to pastors and conferences who due to their theological convictions cannot perform same-sex weddings or ordain self-avowed practicing homosexuals.

The Connectional Conference plan creates two or more connectional conferences under the General Conference. Each connectional conference will have its own unique book of discipline in addition to a smaller general book of discipline. Each connectional conference will have its own understandings and policies regarding sexuality, marriage, ordination and possibly other matters. The connectional conferences elect bishops. Each annual conference and even local churches will decide which connectional conference; they wish to align with. A central conference may form a connectional conference.

The Traditionalist Plan maintains the present stance of the church, and creates systems for increased accountability if pastors, bishops and annual conferences do not comply with the Book of Discipline.

The report from the Council of Bishops will include the full details of the three plans and all related proposals for legislative changes, the recommendation of the council and the narrative of the process leading to bringing all three plans while recommending the One Church Model. The full report will be released, once it has been translated to the official languages of the General Conference, which is estimated to be no later than 8. July.

The information from the Council of Bishops will be presented and discussed at the annual conferences in June. In preparation for the extra General Conference, several annual conferences in the Nordic & Baltic area will have regional gatherings in the fall, where the full report including proposals will be presented and discussed.

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The depth of faith, commitment and diversity I experience in the Nordic & Baltic area blesses me in a variety of ways. Though we do not think alike, we passionately engage in mission, in fellowship and in learning together. We have differing convictions, and yet we share many more fundamental theological commitments.

I call on United Methodists in the Nordic & Baltic area to be in prayer for delegates to the called session of the General Conference gathering in St. Louis, Missouri, 23-26. February 2019. We are all invited to participate in a weekly fast from sundown Thursday to 03.00 PM Friday, and to a daily prayer time from 02:23-02:26 PM for the future witness of the church.

I remind you that no matter what the future will bring, we know that God's mission continues, and in spite of our differences, He will continue to call us to engage in His mission to a broken and hurting world. I rejoice in this calling, and I am committed to serve and to lead through this difficult time in the life of the church focusing on God's mission. United Methodists in the Nordic and Baltic countries are those of hope, grace and love, and this will not change. God's mission is yet alive!

Yours in Christ

Christian Alsted

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