

Episcopal report to the 2019 annual conferences

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called,² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,³ making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling,⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism,⁶ one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

To make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace is by no means an easy task, especially in times of deep disagreement. The unity of the United Methodist Church has been under a great deal of stress for some time. The recent called session of the General Conference decided to support the Traditional Plan; however, the conference was not able to come to a broad based decision. While many had hoped, the called session of General Conference would give us a stronger sense of unity, the reality after the conference is that we are even more divided and polarized.

Judicial Council ruling

Late April 2019 the Judicial Council ruled on the petitions passed at General Conference, and their ruling is final. The ruling reaffirmed the Judicial Council's previous two rulings, and found parts of the Traditional Plan constitutional and parts of it unconstitutional. Provisions for churches wanting to leave the connection were ruled constitutional with the note, that a decision made in a local church will require affirmation in the annual conference by a 2/3 majority vote.

It is important for us to be mindful of the fact that while the decisions made at the called session of General Conference 2019 will come into effect in the United States on 1. January 2020, they will not come into effect in the central conferences before 15. May 2021. Between now and 15. May 2021, we will have the 2020 General Conference, which no doubt will make a number of changes and amendments to the Book of Discipline, and we will have our own Central Conference that will be able to make adaptations to the Book of Discipline.

Can we overcome our differences?

The many reactions to the decisions of General Conference across the world indicate that it will be very difficult for us to remain together as one denomination in the future. Several responses and statements in the Nordic and Baltic countries point to a similar division.

Many United Methodists are asking themselves: What does it mean to lead a life worthy of our calling and faithful to our beliefs? In addition, their answers to this profound question are not the same. Even in the Nordic and Baltic area, our answers differ.

The Nordic and Baltic episcopal area is diverse in a number of different ways including our understanding of human sexuality and of how to be in ministry with all people. In spite of our diversities and differences, Nordic and Baltic United Methodists have managed to be in a committed relationship in one church for more than 100 years. We have lived through two world wars together, and we have overcome the separation by the Iron Curtain during the Soviet occupation. Through the years we have built relationships and friendships, we have shared and exchanged ministries, we have supported each other, and we have worshipped and prayed together.

We are not the United States

There is a strong sense of urgency in the United Methodist Church in the US, which the ongoing debates reflect. Furthermore American politics are marked by an either/or, black or white attitude, that leaves little room for nuances, and this affects our church. In Europe, we are accustomed to more complicated political

systems, with several parties that have to collaborate even with parties they disagree with, if they want to accomplish anything.

I urge Methodists in the Nordic and Baltic area not to be carried away by the urgency and polarization in the US debate – we have some time to think and to process the situation and to make wise decisions that will help us in our missional context to live into the future in the best possible way.

A Nordic and Baltic Roundtable

In light of the current situation and as we quickly approach the General Conference 2020 and 2021 Central Conference, I find it responsible and prudent to reflect on and plan proactively for the future.

I am very pleased; the Nordic and Baltic area group of the Central Conference Council has decided to form a roundtable. The roundtable will bring together influencers and leaders from each annual conference in the episcopal area, with the purpose of seeking a foundation for the future of the Nordic and Baltic episcopal area that includes as much unity and as much missional strength as possible.

The desired outcome of the roundtable process is a consensus on one proposal for the future of the Nordic and Baltic area to be brought to the Nordic and Baltic area group early in the fall of 2020, to enable the area group to recommend this proposal to the 2021 Central Conference.

Area cabinet

The area cabinet meets every six months and continues to function as a learning community as well as a strategic leadership team. In the past year, we have focused on building a new strong team of district superintendents that will be able to lead in the significant and challenging times we are in as a church.

Together we do our utmost to stay focused on God's mission while caring for the health and the unity of the entire church.

The European connection

Across Europe, there is a great deal of diversity, yet at the same time, relationships are strong, and there is a significant amount of trust among us. This was obvious when all the European delegates met in January in Germany in preparation for the called session of General Conference in February. To continue to build trusting relationships and remain in dialogue with each other there will be a European cabinet meeting in December 2019.

Young leaders

The third gathering for young clergy under the age of forty is planned to take place in Estonia the 24- 26. April 2020. Building on past experiences conversation, sharing, peer learning and prayer are the main components of the 3 days event, which aims to connect and to build community among young pastors and deacons, who will be serving and leading together in many years to come.

New church starts

We stay focused on starting new faith communities in the episcopal area. In the Nordic countries, we are learning and improving our skills in developing new multicultural faith communities. Almost all churches engage in some kind of ministry with migrants, and we have new pastors from both Africa and the Middle East. Norway and Finland are strengthening their emphasis on starting new faith communities, and we are purposefully beginning to explore Fresh Expressions.

In Estonia, the Baltic Methodist Theological Seminary is exploring possibilities of developing a master's program in new church starts and cultural studies in collaboration with Asbury Theological Seminary.

Called 2Change

The most important and largest area wide event this year is Called2Change in Tallinn, Estonia 26-29. September 2019. This is the 7th School of Congregational Development in the Nordic and Baltic area, and over the past 12 years, the event has had huge impact on the church. This time the theme is “Missional Church Development in the 21st Century” – main speakers are Martyn Atkins, Barry Sloane and Christian Alsted. We will offer tracks on Rethink Church – New Places for New People – Ministry with Migrants – Youth Ministry Can Arise – Creative Communication – Children – Change From the Inside Out – Rethink Music. I am strongly encouraging all local churches to send a team to the event, this is an important investment in the future.

A new book in the series of Nordic Perspectives on Methodism is expected to be published in connection with the Called 2Change event in Tallinn; the theme is “youth and the church”.

Website and social media

The episcopal office has developed a new website, which contains news stories from the area, information about events, and a blog on themes related to mission and church in the Nordic and Baltic area and in a worldwide perspective.

Our Facebook page is updated with news stories and photos from the episcopal area and from the world. Find us on @nbarea and like us.

Finances

The episcopal fund comes out of the fiscal year with a small surplus. The accounts in the area fund make it possible to undertake missional and strategic initiatives, and the Nordic theological funds enable us to support continued theological education, seminars and the publication of books in the field of Wesleyan theology.

Closing

I close by reminding all of us that during a tense period with deep disagreement, we run the risk of ruining relationships that will be difficult to restore. I wish to encourage all of us to remember to care for each other and to be careful with one another. This is a time for prayer, fellowship and conversation, and I urge all us to think carefully before we make a comment or an update on social media, and to avoid saying anything that can be perceived as offensive or polarizing. Christ still calls us to love each other and to share His love with all people.