

Episcopal Report to the Annual Conference 2021

United Methodists in the Nordic & Baltic area are liturgical, contemporary, charismatic, social activists, urban, suburban, small town, rural and much more. We are children, youth, young adults, senior adults, new and mature Christians. We are in many ways a micro cosmos of the global United Methodist Church present on four continents, in more than 45 countries and comprised of an unknown number of cultures and languages, all under the cross and the flame. Being one church is a gift and a challenge, nevertheless, I am committed to shepherd of the whole flock, and thereby provide leadership toward the goal of understanding, reconciliation and unity in the body of Christ.

Thank you to all our pastors, deacons and leaders – in the past year, you have served well under extremely difficult circumstances.

Roundtable Process

Mindful of the diversity in the Nordic and Baltic episcopal area and the divisive potential of our perspectives regarding the understanding of human sexuality and of how we can best be in ministry with all people, a roundtable process has been initiated to seek a foundation for the future of the episcopal area that includes as much unity and as much missional strength as possible.

The Roundtable has met twice, and each meeting has revealed a strong desire of many to find ways to remain together, while there are also strong voices expressing a definite need to separate, if the church alters its current position. The roundtable conversations have been challenging and demanding.

The Covid19 pandemic and the postponement of General Conference has disrupted our process, while it has also offered us additional time to reflect and pray. I ask for your prayers for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, as we continue our round table discernment.

More than One Year of Covid19

The past 15 months have been a time of change, adaptation and intense learning of new behavioral patterns, skills and new ways of doing ministry.

Our high tech and well ordered societies, and our shielded lives have been shaken by a microscopic virus. We have faced our own vulnerability, as we discovered that all our knowledge and scientific advancements were incapable of protecting us from a dangerous and potentially deadly disease.

Our governments all responded with far-reaching lockdowns and severe restrictions. For extensive periods of time we have been unable to worship in our churches and to offer our regular ministries, and we have all had to adapt to changing rules and restrictions.

With very few exceptions, our governments have not considered the Christian churches to be a resource offering hope and comfort to a population in need of help to live through the crisis - rather we have been put in the same category as cultural institution and other spare time activities. This experience ought to be a wake-up call to all Christian churches in the Nordic and Baltic countries. We need to ask ourselves, what is our calling, and how do we influence today's society?

While months of social distancing have been a welcome opportunity to seek deeper in our walk with God, discover gifts and calling, ask for fresh direction. We have also realized that church is physical – we see each other, we smile, we shake hands, we hug, we sing, we pray, we speak, we listen, we serve, we share communion, we baptize – without physical presence important dimensions are missing. All people, even the most introvert, have missed fellowship.

Church, this is our opportunity – we do community really well, and we can offer fellowship in all kinds of groups to accommodate the needs. We already do choirs, small groups, scouts, gatherings for retirees,

youth groups well – imagine groups around running, bicycling, maternity leave, walking, pilgrimage, food banks etc.

During these past months we have seen many local churches developing new and fresh expressions of church, reaching out to the community and to people in need. Almost all churches have developed online ministries, online or live streamed worship, all kinds of different experimental online formats for large groups and small groups have been developed. We have dramatically increased the number of people we are in touch with. Much more can be said about this, I want to point to three things.

- One, online ministry is by no means a temporary solution, until we can go back to “normal” and “real” ministry. Despite the lack of physical presence, virtual ministry is real ministry, which enables us to reach new people, not least, younger people. Today many perceive virtual presence as real presence.
- Two, we must invest resources in developing virtual ministries. We have much to build on, we have gifted people, and we must act now. The good news is: You don’t need a big budget to make significant impact.
- Three, through online ministry we can get in touch with many people, however, the value and success of these ministries is determined by our ability to interact with and build community with them.

Life post-Corona

For the first time in decades, people across the world have had the same long-term experience. What will life in our societies look like post Corona? In which ways will our behavioral patterns, perceptions of social space, value of relationship and care for each other have changed? Will our mutual experience of vulnerability affect people’s openness to seek God? Will we see a spiritual awakening, or will our societies become even more secular?

Only the naive believe, we will simply go back to normal. Normal doesn’t exist. What is the new reality going to be, and what will the opportunities for mission and ministry look like.

One is thing certain, the new reality, will emerge slowly - perhaps slower than we would like.

Don’t be discouraged

Listening to reports from different parts of the world, I find no indications that people will be back in church immediately. My advice is to be patient, don’t count and compare to the situation before the pandemic. People need time to overcome anxiety, to get used to be in a large group of people and to adjust themselves to post-Corona life. Many people have been out of the habit of going to church for more than a year. Some choose digital church, and we cannot compete with all the great preachers and wonderful music in big churches. Our advantage is that we are close, we are real, and we are approachable.

Help people overcome their anxiety by creating safe spaces. Continue to do worship as well as you possibly can and continue to make use of digital means to connect. Do what we do best, build community, connect in in small groups and offer fellowship. Small open fellowships work – they are local, you are seen and recognized and there is an invaluable personal touch.

Take heart don’t be discouraged!

You have a home in the church

At this point in time I wish to say that all our members, clergy, local churches and annual conferences will continue to have a home in the United Methodist Church, whether they consider themselves liberal, evangelical, progressive, traditionalist, middle of the road, conservative, centrist or something else. Too long, have we labelled each other theologically and imposed positions and perceptions on one another in ways that were superficial and disrespectful of the sincerity of our beliefs.

We all have one calling and purpose, to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, and we do this holding on to our Wesleyan heritage that “the living core of the Christian faith is revealed in Scripture, illuminated by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason”.

Right now, we have one thing before us, to be the church Christ has called us to be. “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

Prayerfully submitted

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