

Report from the Nordic & Baltic Roundtable on the Future of the Church October 2019

The 22 participants on the Nordic & Baltic roundtable met for their first meeting on October 25th – 26th 2019, in Copenhagen, Denmark.

The Nordic and Baltic members of the Central Conference Council have initiated this Roundtable process mindful of the diversity in the Nordic and Baltic episcopal area and the divisive potential in our perspectives regarding the understanding of human sexuality and of how we can best be in ministry with all people.

The roundtable process is intended to bring together influencers and leaders from each of the seven conferences in the episcopal area (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Finland S, Finland F, Norway and Denmark), 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 process is consensus on one proposal for the future of the Nordic and Baltic area to be brought to the Nordic and Baltic area group in the fall of 2020, to enable the area group to recommend this proposal to the 2021 Central Conference.

Coming Together

A significant part of this first meeting was dedicated to get to know each other and to build community, and to share experiences, expectations and aspirations. The roundtable gathers a good balance of men and women, clergy and lay, youth, young adult and middle-aged United Methodists. Diverse theological understandings and positions are present, and there are persons who identify as LGBTQ or have family members and friends who identify as LGBTQ.

The Roundtable decided to commit to a covenant for our life together. Our conversations will take place in an atmosphere of worship and prayer, and we commit to pray for each other, for the process and for the United Methodist Church.

The covenant includes a commitment to treat one another with respect, to assume the best in others, to represent one another in the best possible light, to speak the truth with love, and to practice and expect trustworthiness. We will each do our part to offer grace, to create an atmosphere of hospitality, and to moderate our anxiety through mutual encouragement, good humour, and with genuine love for one another.

Furthermore, we covenant to listen actively to others, to seek first to understand rather than to be understood, to ask for clarity or help from others, to remain attentive to cultural, language, and contextual diversity, to be patient with one another, and to foster hopefulness and mutual encouragement.

Our Purpose is Love

To inform our thinking, David N Field did an online lecture based on his book “Our Purpose is Love”. He challenged us to recognize and reclaim love as the centre of our identity and purpose of the church. David Field presents a Wesleyan vision of the church as the embodiment of God’s love in the world and explores the implications of this vision for our life together. The church is where we become creatures of love, learning to love God and neighbour even more completely and authentically through the means of grace. As

a result, we bear witness to the world by reflecting God's love more and more perfectly in the way we treat others and order our common life. Fields lifts up the importance of unity for the church's witness. In his lecture he encouraged us to consider the ways in which embodying God's love can and should influence how we live as individual Christians and as communities of faith, calling us to reclaim and recommit to love as the centre of who we are.

During the reflection time that followed, the importance of going back to the biblical witness and to consult the patristics was emphasized; asking basic questions like, what is salvation. What is mission? Part of the conversation was reflections on what are essentials and what are non-essentials? Furthermore, how do we relate to each other, can we develop trust in each other even if we disagree? How can we value the ministry of people with whom we disagree?

The Church's Current Situation

Bishop Alsted gave an overview of the church's current situation, the different plans that are being proposed to the 2020 General Conference, and the processes that are going on in Denmark, Norway, in other parts of Europe and on a global level.

In our episcopal area only the Denmark and the Norway annual conference have decided on a process to look into possible future scenarios for the annual conference with the purpose of becoming fully inclusive of LGBTQ persons.

As we shared about the situation and the conversations in the different annual conferences it became clear to all us, that our national cultures, missional situations and ecumenical contexts are very diverse which is reflected in our theological thinking and diverse positions.

Essential?

We had intensive conversation about the question: Is your understanding of human sexuality an essential question to you? Why or why not?

To some of us, our understanding of human sexuality is essential, as it is directly connected to our understanding of creation.

To some of us, human sexuality is not an essential question that we must agree on in order to be in the same church.

To some of us, human sexuality is an essential concern as the love for all people is considered the basic teaching of the Bible and Christian faith, and therefore any exclusion of people due to their sexual orientation would be wrong.

To some of us, this is essential, as we believe that the biblical witness says that homosexual practise is a sin.

To some of us, mission is the driving purpose in the New Testament and in the church, and therefore prohibitions against same sex marriage and the ordination of practicing homosexuals is wrong as it prevents us from pursuing God's mission.

While we all have great affection for the United Methodist Church and hold our Wesleyan theological heritage in high esteem, and while we value our connection and the good relations in the episcopal area, we are painfully aware that our diverse understandings affect our relationship.

We will continue to wrestle with this in our coming meetings.

Coming Meetings

For our online meeting on January 2nd, 2020, the members from each country will attempt to identify the essential concerns for their annual conference when it comes to the future of the church and ask: What can we accept? What can we not accept?

We will consider two different scenarios:

- A. The Traditional Plan is passed in its full extent. – What do you think would be the consequences for your annual conference?
- B. A plan is passed that makes it necessary for the annual conference to decide whether to belong to a traditional church or to belong to a church with room for different understandings and practices in the annual conferences and even in the local churches. – What do you think would be the consequences for your annual conference?

In our next face-to-face Roundtable meeting 21-22. February 2020 in Tallinn, Estonia, we will focus on the bible. Knut Refsdal will present different hermeneutical approaches to understand the bible and speak about the Methodist quadrilateral. In addition, we will read two books representing diverse biblical perspectives on homosexuality. “Holy Love”, by Steve Harper, and “Homosexuality and the Church”, by Howard Snyder.

Finally, Bishop Alsted encouraged the group to talk to people who are personally affected by this discussion, and to talk to people with opposite opinions from ourselves.

We encourage all United Methodists in the Nordic and Baltic Area to pray for the Roundtable process and for the church.

The Nordic and Baltic Roundtable
facilitator Christian Alsted