

2.2 Episcopal Address

Knowing that “in God we all live, move and exist”, we welcome delegates and guests to the 2016 Northern Europe and Eurasia Central Conference in Fredrikstad, Norway.

We come together as United Methodists across 11 time zones representing a rich diversity of cultures and ministry contexts, bound together in connectional relationship eager to share Christ with the purpose of making disciples, through which the world may be transformed.

We particularly welcome bishop John Yambasu from Sierra Leone, who is representing the Council of Bishops. We welcome other bishops from Europe, Rosemarie Wenner from Germany and Patrick Streiff from Central and Southern Europe. We welcome our retired bishops, who have previously served in the Central Conference, Øystein Olsen and Hans Växby, while Rüdiger Minor is unable to be here due to prior commitments.

We also welcome ecumenical friends, representatives from the Uniting Church in Sweden, as well as representatives from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Norway, the Baptist Union in Norway and the Norway Council of Churches.

The theme of our conference “In God we all live, move and exist” is a short sentence in a longer speech given to an assembly of philosophers and politicians in Athens. When Paul arrived in the city after a long voyage he walked into a religious, philosophical and political marketplace, where people not unlike many Northern Europeans and Eurasians today were hungry for the next new thing. While Paul was well acquainted with Greek culture and religion, he was not prepared for what he experienced in Athens, and he was, as we can be in our context, deeply distressed by a city flooded with idols. However, he soon caught himself and began to engage with the culture through conversations, debate and by paying attention to the life unfolding around him.

Having drawn quite a bit of attention Paul is taken to the council on Mars Hill to explain himself, no doubt expected to be ridiculed or even punished for his outrageous religious and philosophical claims.

Perhaps we would have advised keeping a low profile in such a situation, but Paul uses his best knowledge and rhetorical skills to deliver a strong polemic speech with frequent quotes from known philosophers to connect with the Athenians while not watering down the gospel, but speaking out against idolatry and pointing to judgement and resurrection.

The sentence “In Him we live, move and exist”, is both inclusive and exclusive. We are all included and contained in God, and yet this God, unknown and unnamed by the Athenians, is exclusively the one, and not one of many. For in him we live, meaning by him, by his originally forming of us, and continually sustaining us. We are constantly depending on Him, he is the original source of life, and he upholds us each moment. From him derives our strength to move, even our slightest movement and our very existence we owe to him. That we live at all is his gift; that we have power to move is his gift; and so is our continued existence. Paul traces our existence in God from the lowest pulsation of life to the highest powers of action. We are wholly and entirely dependent on God.

This is Paul, the missionary, at his finest, moving with the Holy Spirit and intelligently, passionately, relevantly and directly communicating the good news of Christ in a hostile, skeptic and curious culture. Becoming a 21st century missional church in the Northern Europe and Eurasia context includes the adoption of Paul’s missionary postures, thinking, behavior, and practices in order to engage others with the gospel message.

Missiologist Charles Van Engen states it well saying: “Mission is the people of God intentionally crossing barriers from church to non-church, faith to non-faith, to proclaim by word and deed the coming of the Kingdom of God in Jesus Christ; this task is achieved by means of the church’s participation in God’s mission of reconciling people to God, to themselves, to each other, and to the world, and gathering them into the church through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit with a view to the transformation of the world as a sign of the coming of the Kingdom in Jesus Christ.”ⁱ

In prayer and reflection to craft an analyzing, discerning, encouraging and visionary Episcopal address for a church as diverse as our Central Conference presents quite a few challenges. We have decided to approach this by clearly labeling each section with the perspective, it is written from. We don’t presume to be able to address the fullness of complexity and variation that exists across the Central Conference in the two episcopal areas, rather we prayerfully submit these words to you, hoping that the address will help us in our ongoing reflections on what it means to live, serve and be faithful as United Methodist Christians in this part of the world.

Methodist identity - a Eurasia perspective

As many streams of religious traditions and cultural trends flow through our lives in Northern Europe and Eurasia, it is important to know who we are as United Methodists. I was very inspired by the new book “Nordic Perspective on Methodism” that was offered to us at the School of Congregational Development in Tallinn in September 2015. Building on the good work of our Nordic sisters and brothers, I would like to continue this important conversation and what it means to us today.

We have many challenges and streams of modern life that overwhelm our societies and often our churches. The world often imposes on us its worldly values such as individualism, materialism, greed and selfishness. Karl Marx’s socialist ideas failed us in Eurasia, as corruption and absence of freedom killed many good ideals. At the same time, we see that capitalism continues to swallow human lives as it did in the 19th century Europe, but with a more intelligent face this time. The “i” culture makes it almost a cult in our modern world when the needs of others are neglected. How do we as Methodists in Northern Europe and Eurasia continue to be a unique voice that brings hope and relevance? How do we keep our identity and build on it? What is our theology as Methodists?

Identity is characterized by our uniqueness, who we are as Methodists, what makes us Methodists. As a person from the Eurasian context, I find it important to start with a character of a Methodist.

Let me share some of my personal testimony of how I experienced the character of a Methodist when I first came to the UMC in Moscow. In 1992 I came to the Moscow UMC for the first time. It was a period of searching for God and the meaning of life for me. From the very beginning of my encounter with the people called Methodists, I was inspired by their simple and sincere hearts, radical hospitality and practical holiness.

Today, living more than twenty years as a Methodist, I see how these qualities of the first Methodist people in my life have shaped my theology, worldview and my character. I greatly appreciate my Methodist sisters and brothers who have exemplified the love of Christ for me. I am grateful to God who continues to work on

my Christian character, Methodist character, because "...I myself don't think I've reached it, but I do this one thing: I forget about the things behind me and reach out for the things ahead of me. The goal I pursue is the prize of God's upward call in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 3:13-14)

Let us look into these qualities of the Methodist character. As we think about our identity as Methodists, let us consider these questions: Why is this important for us? What makes us Methodists? What distinguishes a Methodist from Christians of other denominations? How can we develop our uniqueness?

We shall look at the following aspects:

1. Simple and sincere fellowship
2. Radical hospitality
3. Practical holiness

Simple and sincere fellowship

When Pope Francis was elected a few years ago one of his actions was widely discussed in the mass media. Pope Francis refused to use his bulletproof "Popemobile" and wanted to use the regular car of the middle class - Ford Focus. People were applauding him around the world. I was also glad for this fact, but at the same time I have experienced mixed feelings.

On the one hand, I was glad that Pope Francis sent a signal to his colleagues and all Christians to live in simplicity despite your high positions. The minister of any level is called to be the servant of the people, be simple and approachable to people, and not to shield him/herself from the people in an expensive automobile or in a mansion with high fence.

On the other hand, I was disappointed that the state of the Christian church today is such that this kind of action by the Pope is considered heroic.

When I came to the United Methodist Church for the first time in my life I was very impressed by the people. In spite of my negative expectations and mistrust, I met simple and sincere people. They were dressed simple, talked sincerely on different topics, shared meal together in joy and simplicity of the heart. This was an inspiration to me to learn more about people called Methodists, who they are and who is their God.

I joined a small Bible study group, and every week I have discovered the character of Jesus Christ and his ministry to people. Jesus was always with people. He healed the sick, fed the hungry, advocated for the poor, visited the lonely. Most of his time he was with his disciples.

John Wesley implemented the gospel principles of serving people as he led the Methodist movement in England. Following Christ, he served uneducated people, helped workers, preached the gospel in the open air. His whole life John Wesley spent in simple and sincere fellowship with different kinds of people, inspiring them to follow Christ and grow in perfection every day.

Gospel stories of Jesus Christ's life, example of John Wesley and the actual life of Methodists have strongly shaped my understanding of the character of the Methodist. Methodist is the one who is simple and sincere in fellowship. It is easy to fellowship with this person and have a discussion. A Methodist inspires you to grow in love and perfection. It is easy to trust this person and pray together.

This understanding of the character of a Methodist was strongly shaped in me together with simple and sincere lives of the first Christians and apostles: "Every day, they met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They shared food with gladness and simplicity. They praised God and demonstrated God's goodness to everyone. The Lord added daily to the community those who were being saved." (Acts 2:46-47, CEB)

Question for reflection: *How do newcomers experience fellowship with us as Methodists when they meet us and make first steps to follow Christ with us?*

Radical hospitality

Radical hospitality is a second quality of the character of the Methodist that I have abundantly experienced from my sisters and brothers in the congregation, when I began to learn Christian faith. My new friends invited me to be a guest in their homes. They shared much of their time with me and all the other newcomers cared for our needs, listened to our stories. I felt as though I was a very honorable guest. It is not a secret that many people do not feel much of the hospitality when they visit Moscow, and this city seems cold, busy and indifferent. But I have experienced just the opposite in the United Methodist Church. I have felt love, care and generosity. They truly treated me as their own brother. It was a radical hospitality - such hospitality when people do more for you than you expect or can imagine.

We see the practice of radical hospitality even from the Old Testament times. For example, Abraham extended hospitality to the three strangers. He prepared meal for them and spent time in fellowship with them. Also, when people harvested, they had a rule to leave part of the harvest on the field so that migrants and poor people could feed themselves. Hospitality always mindful of serving people. It is our attitude, our acts of mercy, our desire to understand and cover the needs of people.

In practice, radical hospitality can be expressed in the following actions:

- sacrifice of time
- food sharing
- providing a room for overnight stay
- ability to listen
- caring for the needs of people

Sacrifice of time is a rare thing in our modern life. Most people are tense because of multiple responsibilities and meetings in their calendar. In urban settings people try to do more, earn more, achieve more. In the midst of such a rhythm of life I am reminded of Moses's prayer: *"Teach us to number our days so we can have a wise heart."* (Psalm 90:12)

In Jesus's ministry a person and his/her needs were always a priority. When people encountered Jesus they were inspired to serve God and one another. Jesus sacrificed his time in order to extend hospitality to others. Also, he himself visited different people as a guest and had fellowship with them, served them. Time which we give to people is a our hospitality in action. Without sacrifice of time it is impossible to serve people.

Food is something that unites people, no matter how different they might be. It is interesting to look at Jesus's ministry through the prism of when and with whom he had food. In times of Jesus, to sit at the same table and share food meant that you treat others as equals. Jesus had fellowship with poor and rich, sick and healthy, powerful and outcasts of the society.

Common meal - at the same table - is a mark of the character of any Methodist. In the Bible, Kingdom of Heaven is often associated with a banquet. Therefore, our banquet - common meal and glorification of God - is a prototype of the Kingdom of Heaven. "Let your Kingdom come... on earth as it is in heaven".

"Then Jesus said to the person who had invited him, "When you host a lunch or dinner, don't invite your friends, your brothers and sisters, your relatives, or rich neighbors. If you do, they will invite you in return and that will be your reward. Instead, when you give a banquet, invite the poor, crippled, lame, and blind. And you will be blessed because they can't repay you. Instead, you will be repaid when the just are resurrected." When one of the dinner guests heard Jesus' remarks, he said to Jesus, "Happy are those who will feast in God's kingdom." (Luke 14:12-15)

Happy are the Methodists who invite people for lunch or dinner!

Providing a room for overnight stay is an important part of hospitality. Almost every month I meet with refugees, migrant workers, travelers, international guests. All of them need a room for overnight stay. Jesus and his apostles were traveling preachers. They traveled light and relied on hospitality of the people, trusting God. It was a different time and a different world. Today we fence ourselves by many metal doors, security systems, locks and alarms. People in big cities are not always happy to receive the news about a distant relative who comes to stay for an uncertain number of days. There are many difficult stories on this topic.

The character of a Methodist is distinguished by radical hospitality which aspires to provide a room for overnight stay. It is an opportunity to serve people - prepare clean linen, a room and give a guest a possibility for a good night's sleep. When you care for a person in such a way, he or she is filled with grace.

I remember when all my childhood time we visited each other. My twenty cousins always asked their parents to stay overnight. In those times, the absence of a late night bus gave us much joy. We had the opportunity to have much time for fellowship and play. It was amazing grace!

Ability to listen is an important characteristic for every Methodist. Without it the hospitality will not be complete. It was ability to listen to my brothers and sisters in the church that helped me in the beginning of my spiritual journey to feel myself at home and sort out my thoughts and struggles of my soul. When you

have the atmosphere of listening at home or in the church, every person finds comfort and understanding here. Jesus listened to people in order to understand their needs and to help them in their difficulties.

Caring for the needs of people has always characterized the Methodists. In the beginning of the twentieth century deaconess Anna Eklund helped the sick and poor people of Saint-Petersburg. She was pushed out of Russia by the government to return to her home in Finland because she was actively caring for the needs of people! Today we have sisters and brothers in our congregations who constantly help people - orphans, homeless, lonely, elderly, international students - all who have needs. Caring for the needs of people is part of the DNA for every Christian-Methodist.

Question for reflection: *On the scale of 1 to 10 how would you rate the hospitality of your church? Why? What can your church do to make it 1 or 2 points higher?*

Practical holiness

From the very beginning the Methodist movement was characterized by believers who regularly and deeply studied the Bible and practiced its lessons in their everyday life. When John Wesley preached the gospel in England, there were many poor and sick people in the society. Workers were harshly exploited. Medical care was not accessible for most people. The task of the people called Methodists was not simply to study the Bible and participate in theological discussions, but to transform society and grow in perfection personally. That is practical holiness - when we study the Bible and apply it in everyday life. The word of God becomes flesh and is active through us, transforming this world.

“The underlying energy of the Wesleyan theological heritage stems from an emphasis upon practical divinity, the implementation of genuine Christianity in the lives of believers...The Wesleyan emphasis upon the Christian life—faith and love put into practice—has been the hallmark of those traditions now incorporated into The United Methodist Church.”ⁱⁱ

My first year of Christian faith I began to study the Bible and followed examples of my sisters and brothers in the church. I became a part of the movement of the Holy Spirit. Together with sisters and brothers we learned God’s Word for us and then went into the world to serve people. We bought food and distributed it to homeless people, we prayed with them. We visited orphanages and played with orphans, cleaned floors and windows in the hospitals and comforted sick and lonely people there. All these things had a great impact on me. I realized that Methodists are people of practical holiness. These people do care about their own status or achievements. They simply serve people in need and they do it every week.

Every week we meet people in need. Someone sees a television program about a child who needs a surgery. Others look through social networks and want to respond and help the elderly man who is so lonely. It seems that the number of people in need increases every time. And someone might give up. Others may start philosophical conversations about the world order and blame the government for all our troubles in the country. But a Methodist is someone who is filled with spiritual power which comes from God. He or she does practical things that help specific people. It is not a one time thing and not a hobby which we do only when we feel like it. Practical holiness is in the character of the Methodist, in the attitude towards people. It is implemented every week, and it is what we do with joyful and thankful heart.

In today's world, where many values and foundations are mixed up and confused, when pluralism and tolerance become more important than your uniqueness, it is necessary for us to realize once again who we are and what it means for us to be United Methodists. What newcomers see, feel and receive when they come to our church? What is our Methodist identity? How our character helps them to grow spiritually? I pray and hope that every week new people will come to our churches and be inspired by simple and sincere fellowship, experience radical hospitality and grow with us in practical holiness. May the Lord bless us!

Question for reflection: *How does your church exemplify practical holiness? What makes you proud about your church members?*

Secularization – a Nordic & Baltic perspective

When I became a Christian in the summer of 1978, I knew my life would have to change. I had been flirting with Christianity for more than a year, going to the local youth group on a weekly basis, attending worship several times a month and enthusiastically going to youth camps. But I was living in two separate worlds almost as two different persons among my friends in Church and among my friends outside of the church. During a youth camp I decided to follow Christ, which was the first step in bringing the two worlds together. I experienced a strong sense of Jesus' presence in my life, and steadily supported and encouraged by Christian friends I began to apply my Christian values in all areas of life, and I began to share my faith with others. I knew a change had happened, and though some made fun of me, I continued going to the parties and hanging out with my non-Christian friends, I just acted differently. Conversion to Christ was not only about faith, it was about breaking away from negative life patterns and beginning to live a new life with new values.

In the Baltic and Eurasia countries being a Christian for decades implied unpleasantness and a number of restrictions. Being a member of a free church like the Methodist Church in the Nordic countries was and is still perceived as being odd. You are not only a Christian, which is strange enough, you are even standing outside of the realm of the majority church.

Magnus Malm in his book on secularizationⁱⁱⁱ notes, that as long as the local church emphasized the radicalism of discipleship, people found support there and willingly suffered through the name-calling and marginalization that often came with being part of a free church like the Methodist Church.

But when the relationship with Christ dries out and is replaced by doctrinal and legalistic guidelines directing faith and behavior, it becomes harder and harder to move against the tide and increasingly difficult to perceive the consequences of the Christian life as anything but a burden.

"Then an ambition is born to be accepted at any price by the very society the movement once turned its back on, and the finest compliment from a long-time colleague becomes: Really, are you a Christian? I never imagined that. As little difference as possible is the goal. And the culture of the free churches is more and more shaped by a longing for the recognition of the public culture than by the desire to be counter cultural for the sake of God's kingdom."^{iv}

Another possible reaction is for the church to distance itself from society and to create a bubble of religious unreality, focusing on the inner Christian life and on a limited number of moral virtues mainly relating to sex and drugs. The church may be fervent in worship, the music and atmosphere may even be vibrant, however

the Christian life has been reduced to an emotional relationship with Christ combined with a perception of discipleship reduced to a morally pure behavior while all other aspects of life are left untouched.

I am well aware of the fact, that the situation is different across the Central Conference. However, I urge us to be mindful of the fact that secularization is a powerful force that slowly and unnoticeably affects society as well as the church. It may be tempting to perceive secularization as a development in society happening to us as a result of materialism and the breakdown of morality. May I suggest that we take a hard look at ourselves first. Could Magnus Malm have a point in saying that it may be the church secularizing society, rather than society secularizing the church. Could it be that the dominant source of secularization is not opposition and materialism but rather the faith we don't practice? The prayers we don't pray? The Bible text we don't return to? The worship services we don't participate in? The many times we have neglected to listen to older and more experienced Christians? The opportunities we have missed to openly explain the faith and share, what it means to follow Christ?

According to our culture there is no absolute truth. Our understanding of God is subjective and cannot be described in absolute terms. An intellectually argued defense of the Christian faith becomes irrelevant. What counts is the personal experience and relationship with God. This dichotomy is foreign to our Methodist tradition. Wesley connected argument with trust, truth with purpose, doctrine with relationship, he found no contrast between the mind and the heart. In Wesleyan practice Scripture, tradition, experience and reason are the general sources of reflection on the Christian life and faith. Wesley was known as "a man of one book", and in his understanding the Bible had a normative and primary authority. – Illustrated by tradition, meaning the combined experience of the Christians over time. Vitalized through experience. And assessed by reason. This Wesleyan Quadrilateral can help us, as we explain, teach, preach, share and interpret the Christian faith in our time.

The temptation to follow the mainstream culture is as old as the Christian movement. Paul addresses this in several of his letters "Don't be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you can figure out what God's will is—what is good and pleasing and mature." (CEB Romans 12:2) The cure from conformation is transformation, is the renewing of our mind. Conformation is the wide path. Transformation is the narrow path, which is the path of discipleship.

The ongoing mission of the church is to lead people into this transformation process and as a community of faith to grow together in love and holiness as we embody the gospel in our everyday communal life. In other words, we make disciples of Jesus Christ, and through this we believe the world will be transformed. This implies that we continuously reflect on, articulate and show what it means to follow Christ in our present day and age.

Question for reflection: *What should we preach, teach and live to counter secularization within the church and in our society?*

A World Wide Connection – a Nordic & Baltic perspective

The United Methodist Church is in a crisis. We are increasing the number of vital congregations, and we are bearing significant fruit in the focus areas, leadership, new places for new people, ministry with the poor and global health. In the last 10 years, the total membership of the denomination has grown by 24%. This doesn't sound like crisis. And yet we are in a crisis.

The church finds itself in an extremely fragile, highly contested time. We are divided over our understanding of human sexuality, and we struggle to keep the unity of the church.

In a statement from president of the Council of Bishops Bruce Ough says concerning the dissonance between the decision in May of the General Conference to ask the Council of Bishops to form a Commission on a Way Forward and decisions later made by conferences and groups in the church: “ The landscape has changed dramatically. The reported declarations of non-compliance from several annual conferences, the intention to convene a Wesleyan Covenant Association and the election of the Rev. Karen Oliveto as a bishop of the church have opened deep wounds and fissures within The United Methodist Church and fanned fears of schism.”^v

While the tension is growing, and leaders in the United States are openly discussing, what the future of the United Methodist Church will look like, if we are not united anymore, let us be mindful of the fact, that even with nearly 60% of the membership of the United Methodist Church in the United States, we are still a World Wide connection and decisions are still made by the General Conference. Even if some sort of division becomes a reality in the United States, we are still here, and we can make the decision to remain united in Northern Europe and Eurasia.

In 1786 John Wesley preached a sermon “On Schism” where he distinguishes between “separation” and “schism,” with separation referring to a break from a church to form another church, and schism referring to divisions within a church. According to Wesley schism in a scriptural context is the same as heresy, and separation can be just as heretical, if it is causeless.

“Yet, it must needs be, that offenses will come:” Yea, abundance of them will of necessity arise when a breach of this sort is made in any religious community; while they that leave it endeavour to justify themselves, by censuring those they separate from; and these on the other hand retort the charge, and strive to lay the blame on them. But how mightily does all this altercation grieve the Holy Spirit of God! How does it hinder his mild and gentle operations in the souls both of one and the other! Heresies and schisms (in the scriptural sense of those words) will, sooner or later, be the consequence; parties will be formed, on one and the other side, whereby the love of many will wax cold.”^{vi}

Leaders in the United Methodist Church may be tempted to consider some sort of separation to be the better or easier way to release tension, rather than continuing the struggle to find some common ground to remaining united. For the United Methodist Church in Northern Europe and Eurasia, even with the diversity of positions on human sexuality present in some annual conferences and between annual conferences, as well as for the whole denomination, I believe a separation would be devastating not only organizationally but even more spiritually.

Jesus points us to an inseparable unity modeled by His own unity with the Father, a unity that will cause the world to believe. “I’m not praying only for them but also for those who believe in me because of their word. ²¹ I pray they will be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. I pray that they also will be in us, so that the world will believe that you sent me. ²² I’ve given them the glory that you gave me so that they can be one just as we are one. ²³ I’m in them and you are in me so that they will be made perfectly one. Then the world will know that you sent me and that you have loved them just as you loved me.” (CEB John 17:23) In

obedience to words of Jesus I intent to do my utmost to serve Him for the unity of the church, and I invite you to join me.

Question for reflection: *How can you and your congregation contribute to the unity of the church?*

Missional movement - a Eurasia perspective

Methodism is a missional movement. We experience this movement when we move in God and with God. We produce our best fruits when we move in God on the mission fields. John Wesley was in sync with God when he decided to risk and preach in the open field, when he served the poor and sick, when he wrote simple brochures about health for those who did not have access to medical care.

In our Northern Europe and Eurasia Central Conference we have a great historical example of mission work. I've been deeply moved by the story of sister Anna Eklund, by her faithfulness, her bravery and sacrificial heart in her ministry to God and neighbor. Deaconess Anna Eklund did not spare her energy, nor her health when she ministered to people who were dying by thousands from hunger and cholera in Saint-Petersburg, Russia in the 1920s. In winter time many people did not have shoes to keep their feet warm. Sister Anna did the impossible in order to organize help for the poor and sick people of Saint Petersburg. She gave away everything that she had in order to save lives of the people and to care for their souls. Tears come to your eyes when you read her letters because in them you feel the great power of God, hope and willingness to give one's soul for the redemption of many.

When you study the life of an outstanding person, it is very important to see how their character and personality were formed.

Anna Eklund was born in Turku, Finland on May 25, 1867. While still a teenager she felt a call from God for ministry and received education as a deaconess at Bethany Center in Hamburg, Germany. Already at 19 years old, she was commissioned as deaconess at the Annual Mission Conference of Finland and Russia.

Upon arrival to the cemetery in Turku, Turun hautausmaa, which is located in the city just 5 kilometers from the center, you can find Anna Eklund's grave. The words on her grave stone say: she served the sick and suffering people in Russia from 1907 to 1930. This was her mission and she was faithful to the very end. In fact, Anna was in Saint Petersburg even in 1931 when Communist oppression on Christians turned from bad to worse. But Anna wrote from Saint Petersburg to her Bishop: "our position remains firm - to work for Russia; therefore, in spite of everything we will be beside our people".

Unfortunately, soon after that the local authorities threw Anna out of the country blaming her of doing harm in all the good deeds that she had done for the poor and sick, and for the children. I pray that every Methodist in the world could be "blamed" for such ministry to people.

On the back cover of the Journal of Mission Conference of Finland and Saint Petersburg 1908 are the words of John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement:

«Give me one hundred preachers who fear nothing but sin and desire nothing but God, and I are not a straw whether they be clergymen or laymen, they alone will shake the gates of hell and set up the kingdom of heaven upon earth.»

I believe that Anna Eklund is one of these preachers of the gospel in Eurasia. Because of her faithfulness, brave and sacrificial heart, people of Saint Petersburg could experience Kingdom of Heaven upon earth.

«And I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then I said, Here am I; send me». (Isaiah 6: 8)

Methodism is a missionary movement aimed at making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. What can be more honorable and meaningful than to respond to this calling of God and to become a part of this missionary movement? I am grateful to the United Methodists in Northern Europe and Eurasia, who devoted their lives to serving Christ and His Church. We continue our missionary movement to the East and West, North and South.

More than two hundred million Russian-speaking people in Eurasia do not practice religious life. At the same time the majority of them are at different stages of a spiritual quest in their lives. In many European countries the number of people whose childhood was not in the church is growing. Focus on mission and expansion of the missionary movement is one of the main characteristics of the Methodist Church.

To further expand our mission in Eurasia area, we are committed to train and deploy missionary teams and mission volunteers every year at the level of churches, districts and conferences. I challenge every local church to be brave and sacrificial and participate in mission work outside your district or annual conference during the next quadrennium.

We are part of the movement of the Holy Spirit and God challenges us today to go outside of our comfort zone and risk so that we can make disciples of Jesus Christ. The old paradigm of people automatically coming to church just because we exist does not work. The new paradigm of movement calls us to follow the footsteps of Jesus and his apostles who were always on the move, making disciples by inviting people into personal relationship with Jesus and experience practical holiness. God actively reveals God-self to us through emigrants, refugees, people of different races, cultures and languages, people with different religious backgrounds and system of values. I thank God for our churches who respond to God's challenge and move forward in its mission by making disciples in this new reality of our world.

Peace making and reconciliation are important part of our mission today. As we experience shock and insecurity caused by multiple terrorist attacks in several European countries, and war is still a reality in Ukraine, we as Methodists are called to be proactive and become messengers of hope. This mission work is theological and practical. We need to uncover our theology of peace making and reconciliation. Jesus is our Peace and because of Him we are reconciled with God and with each other. *“Because all the fullness of God was pleased to live in him, and he reconciled all things to himself through him—whether things on earth or in the heavens. He brought peace through the blood of his cross.”* (Collosians 1:19-20) How can we, as Methodist movement in Northern Europe and Eurasia today, build peace between local Europeans and many immigrants and refugees? How can we build peace and reconciliation between Russians and Ukrainians? Can we lead our people in this ministry and mission?

The Bible gives us many examples of reconciliation and peace making between Jews, Christians, Samaritans, Gentiles, slaves and free, men and women. What can we learn from them? One thing is for sure - it is that God always has a triumph in God's mission. Sometimes because of us and sometimes in spite of us, God works in our world - through each of us individually and through our churches (in our strength and in our weakness) - God brings redemption and reconciliation which we all need today as never before. Let us encourage one another to move forward with faith and hope, become peace makers, help people to reconcile with God and with each other.

Start and renew – a Nordic & Baltic perspective

We were waiting in a pub in Oxford. "We" were 3 Norwegian district superintendents and I in England to look at new approaches to be church, or as they say "Fresh Expressions of Church". After a hectic weekend with several visits to different ministries and churches, we had taken the train to Oxford for a conversation with one of the thinkers behind "Fresh Expressions".

I admit; I was surprised when a man with thin white hair entered the pub, came up to me and introduced himself: "Hello, I am Michael Moynagh, welcome to Oxford." I had expected a young dynamic man, but soon we were at a table having tea and scones with a retiree telling us, why it is so urgently necessary for today's church to think out of the box in new missional ways. After less than 5 minutes in Rev. Dr. Michael Moynagh's company, I had been thoroughly reminded that new thinking, passion and whole hearted commitment to the kingdom of God has very little to do with age.

There are many similarities between the difficult situation of the church in Britain and the Church in Northern Europe, however, in Britain the Church of England along with the Methodist Church has decided to do something about it. "Fresh Expressions" is changing the whole understanding of what it means to be church in Britain, Michael Moynagh told us

From religion-indifferent to religion-hostile

In spite of a relatively large membership in the majority churches in Northern Europe, the church touches a declining segment – the same is true for the free churches. Alternative worship services, innovative children's ministries and edgy music programs may affect this, but it will not turn the development around. We live in a post-Christendom age, where very few look to the church for answers, and the ignorance of even the most basic Christian beliefs is almost total.

Today any kind of religious worship is under pressure, much due to the migration of people groups with a very distinct religious identity, which scares the indigenous population whose religious perception and Christian awareness is almost non-existent. Authorities, institutions and the media don't know what to do with people, who allow their lifestyle and decision-making to be directed by their religious values and beliefs. The only response is control, rules and restrictions in the freedom of religion - high schools ban religious gatherings of students, the use of religious symbols is restricted in public space, foreign preachers have to go through an extensive and complicated approval-process, to mention just a few examples. While the majority churches still enjoy a certain status, even their privileges are being reduced. The secular Northern European culture appears to be moving from religion-indifferent to religion-hostile with no real signs of improvement in the future.

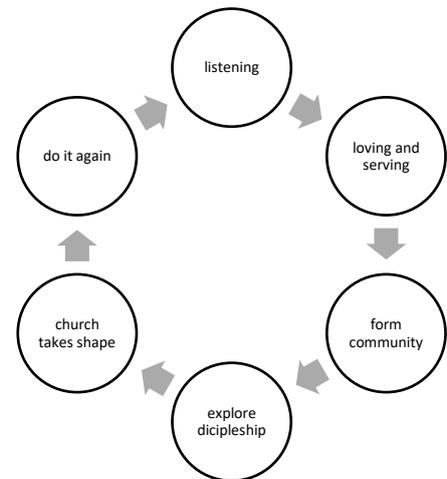
A fresh look

There are more than sufficient reasons for the church to whine, however, this is not the time for us to loose heart, but to think in new innovative ways. The United Methodist Church has a long history of searching for signs of God’s mission at work in the world, and for developing or borrowing new innovative approaches to take part in His mission. - Just think of field preaching, small groups, Sunday schools, music ministries from hymns to revival songs to contemporary gospel music, the Alpha course, Natural Church Development, serenity worship, School of Congregational Development, the Timothy leadership program and much more. Innovation is an ongoing calling from a God who continues to share his salvation, through his church to new generations. If we stop thinking in new ways about being church, we miss the opportunity for renewal, development and growth in all thinkable areas of the church now and in the long-term perspective. We simply freeze up in the past and present ways of doing ministry, and convulsively hold on to ways, that are not effective anymore. And it will not help us to put guilt on each other for not trying hard enough or for not being faithful enough.

We don’t need a new method or a new universal solution to save the church. What we need is a renewed understanding and appreciation of what Christ is already doing sharing his love and bringing about salvation through his church to the people of this world. This is where Fresh Expressions come into the picture.

Fresh Expressions of Church

What are they doing with Fresh Expressions of church? The starting point is people. People with a sense of urge or even a calling to step outside of the comfort zone of the church. In the neighborhood they live in or move into they begin to listen and to learn. Much like Paul in the square of Athens they talk with people, they try to figure out what occupies the residents. They search for ways and approaches to love and serve the community and people living there – perhaps an area needs a clean-up, there may be a need for a cultural meeting place, youth may need help and protection on the streets at night, perhaps old and frail people need practical assistance, children and youth may need a drop-in centre, perhaps, perhaps, perhaps.... And slowly they build a network of people, slowly they build community. And slowly they begin to introduce Jesus and share his story. Perhaps they start an Alpha course or something similar. And even slower a faith community begins to take shape. It looks significantly different from church, as we know it. They are not first and foremost focused on having weekly worship services, as we recognize it from the established church. The relation with Jesus, the caring and tangible fellowship with others, ministry in the community and first and last people is at the heart of this Fresh Expression of church. This is church with head, heart and hands. And then they begin all over again.



To summarize, Fresh Expressions are forms of church that listen to people and enter their culture, serve outside the reach of the existing church, make discipleship a priority and intentionally form church.

Experience has shown that the fresh expressions of church often are developed in cooperation with an existing church. Some pastors and congregations are courageous and open enough to set members free to

step outside the walls of the church and to experiment with new ways of being church. Some pastors and congregations are even willing to support new initiatives with prayer, encouragement and money. It may be an abandoned church, that's made available. It may be a cooperation between two or more denominations in a city.

I know, we have clergy and local churches with this kind of courage, and that God is calling people in our churches to step out of their comfort zones

What's wrong with the existing church?

Nothing. The existing church should not be taken out of the equation. The existing church, classic or contemporary, served by dedicated and able clergy and good and committed laity, who with a vibrant faith is involved in the community and in the people living there, will have a significant role to play in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of Northern Europe and of the world. Churches like that, and we have several, are making a difference in people's lives and in their communities week after week. They come in all sizes. They are in small towns and in large cities. Some have been vital for years, others have been revitalized in recent years. They are served by young, middle aged and old pastors, male and female.

I visited one of these churches on a Monday evening to meet with the pastor. There was a choir practice going on in the sanctuary, and it turned out, they were welcoming new people to become part of the choir. – I guess they thought, I was one of them, though I was probably a bit old. On my way into the church I met 3 different persons, who all were saying things like – “Great that you are here, this is a wonderful church”, “Hello, good to see you, I really enjoy to be part of the fellowship in this church”. “There is so much going on here. It means so much to me to be part of this church.” When I came inside, I saw the pastor greeting people at the door, saying hello, small talking, smiling, laughing. People put on a name tag, they were talking to each other. I don't know, if an atmosphere can be smiling, but that's how I would characterize the atmosphere in that church “smiling”, a warm and welcoming atmosphere, shaped by people who love their faith community.

Reflecting on the healthy and vital churches I have visited in the episcopal area in the past quadrennium, I want to point to some characteristics I have noticed they have in common:

- a. They engage in need oriented mission. They focus on people, particularly on those who don't know Jesus . They continuously look for new diaconal ways to reach out into the community, and they engage in mission outside of the country. Their mission focus is reflected in their budget.
- b. They have a warm, welcoming and caring atmosphere. They love people, they see people and they care, and this is modelled by the pastor and the leadership.
- c. They emphasize discipleship in some kind of small group setting. They use a variety of different approaches helping people to grow together in discipleship, Alpha courses, prayer ministries, prayer groups, bible groups, mentoring programs, teaching opportunities and more.
- d. They value and emphasize children and youth, which is reflected in their worship services, in their ministry and in their budget.
- e. They have passionate worship. The style of worship may be diverse but the passion is the same. The resources available vary but there is always an involvement of several people in the worship service.
- f. They unashamedly teach financial stewardship, and they connect it with discipleship.

These are in no way groundbreaking observations, but merely what characterizes good and solid Methodist ministry in the local church. Vital ministry like this is the backbone of our denomination.

Question for reflection: *What characterizes your local church?*

It will take more

In spite of all the qualities of healthy existing churches, I am convinced that the existing church is not enough. The majority churches in Northern Europe have lost their missional strength decades ago and are only at the verge of realizing and beginning to deal with it, while they still struggle with large groups of clergy, theologians and other church people who are quite satisfied with the current situation. We may be reluctant to realize it, but we are affected by the perceptions in the majority church.

Let me be very clear, we cannot be happy with the current state of the Christian church in our countries, and if we believe, it will do with a few adjustments and some renewal of the existing church, I believe we are fooling ourselves. As Hans Växby and I said four years ago, “we are in need of renovation, not redecoration”, which implies new ways of thinking.

We will need more churches, and we will need all kinds of churches to reach all kinds of people. In the past 6-7 years we have started several new churches and faith communities. While they all have their unique story, they began with a vision and a call from God to one or several persons, and almost all of them were started from another church. Theologian Eddie Gibbs says: “Old churches must not simply stand as monuments to the past but as spiritual grandparents that have invested in the future by passing on their life to others and releasing their offspring to form new congregations. Church planting needs to be given priority by old-line denominations.”^{vii} I agree with Gibbs’ perception; I am also mindful of the fact, that starting a new church is a challenging and demanding process, and we certainly have made some mistakes along the way. Nevertheless, we have also seen significant growth in new faith communities, and we have by the grace of God experienced that it is possible even for the United Methodist Church in Northern Europe to start new churches when we dare to experiment and leave our comfort zone.

An old professor in Oxford reminded me of this when he with great fervor told us, “God is doing a new thing.” I believe we are experiencing some of it.

Question for reflection: *How does your local church engage in mission? What possibilities do you see to start a new faith community from your local church?*

Migration – a Nordic & Baltic perspective

“Europe is experiencing a refugee crises” is a statement we have heard frequently in the past year, as by the end of 2015 the EU received a total of over 1.2 million first-time asylum claims. This rhetoric however seems to ignore the fact, that while receiving 1.2 million asylum seekers certainly is a challenge, the ones experiencing crisis are the refugees.

According to the United Nations’ refugee agency (UNHCR)^{viii} there are 65.3 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, out of those there are 21.3 refugees and 10 million stateless people. Out of the refugees world wide 54% come from Syria (4.9 mill), Afghanistan (2.7 mill) and Somalia (1.1 mill). The vast majority of

refugees continue to be hosted by countries in the Middle East such as Turkey (2.5 mill), Pakistan (1.6 mill), Lebanon (1.1 mill).

Every single day nearly 34.000 people are forced to flee their homes because of conflict and persecution. Over half of them are under the age of 18, in other words they are children and teenagers.

Each of them has a name. Each of them is someone's son or daughter or father or mother. Each of them has a story. They are never ever just a crowd, a wave, a flood or a problem – each of them is loved and known by the God who made himself known in Jesus Christ, who said: "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father." (NRSV Matt.10:29)

Massive movements of people have taken place throughout the history of the planet due to factors like climate change, famine, war, persecution and even the hope of a better and more prosperous future. Famine made Jacob take his family, the Israelites, to Egypt, and several years later oppression and persecution made the people leave. This shaped the understanding "You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (NRSV Deut.10:19) Or as the Common English Bible puts it: "That means you must also love immigrants because you were immigrants in Egypt."

War took God's people away in exile in Babylon. Persecution made Mary and Joseph flee to Egypt with their little son Jesus. Multiple times in the early and later history of the church, persecution made Christians flee to other countries and regions which in turn often led to mission and expansion of the church. In the hope and search of better opportunities for their future people from Northern Europe and Eurasia migrated to America in great numbers in the 19th and early 20th century. Several of these migrants later brought Methodism back to their home countries.

We tend to neglect and forget our own history and spiritual heritage, and allow public opinion to inform and shape our perceptions. At a time when xenophobia, islamophobia and plain racism are surfacing on social media and printed media, and even in public debates on radio and television among politicians and other influencers in our societies, Methodists have a special calling to remind ourselves and our societies of the biblical message of hospitality, kindness and love. Furthermore, we have an obligation to speak truth to power, when governments to protect our wealth cut foreign development aid or re-direct it to cover domestic expenses related to receiving refugees. Likewise there appears to be growing need for us to openly point out and oppose prejudice and racism that dehumanizes our fellow human beings.

New opportunities

A couple of weeks ago I received the following text message: "Dear bishop. I just have to share this. Good things are happening. This evening we had almost 60 new international students in our church café. In the last 3 worship services just about one third of them have been present. They listen very attentively. I prayed with one of them last Sunday, she wanted an encounter with Jesus. Most of them are Buddhist or without any religion. We have never had this many new contacts at one time, God really has sent us a "wave". I hope this encourages you! Tomorrow evening I will go to another city, there we will have a meeting with interpretation to both Farsi and Arabic. God is at work. Be blessed!"

The face of ministry is changing. While 10 years ago our churches were ethnically homogenous, today they are becoming increasingly multicultural and multiethnic. More and more churches are offering worship experiences in multiple languages or they offer translation. This change comes significantly slower in the Baltic countries, however even in Tallinn, Estonia we are working on starting an international church. We are in touch with a growing number of migrants with a Muslim background, and several of them have

been baptized and converted to Christianity. A guide is being developed to assist clergy and local churches in respectful ministry with Muslims who are considering to convert to Christianity.

Several of our churches in the Nordic countries have actively reached out to refugees and migrants by simple acts of hospitality and goodness, opening their churches, offering language and culture courses, participating in community programs with refugees and migrants, offering friendship and creating meeting points. Churches have started ministries in asylum centers, others make international pot-lucks and cultural gatherings. They also say that once the initial excitement has passed, it can be hard work for a church to remain committed to this kind of demanding ministry, and yet building relationships and being in ministry with brothers and sisters in need is what Christ has called us to.

Question for reflection: *In which ways is migration affecting your community, and how does your local church welcome and engage in ministry with refugees?*

Connection in the central conference – a Eurasia perspective

God blesses us with the wonderful gift of a connectional church. Sisters and brothers from our countries can experience and share love, learning, and richness of life. Along with effective communication, connectional UMC helps us celebrate our gifts and graces with a new level of richness and abundance.

In the Episcopal greetings of the Book of Discipline we read about connectionalism and interdependence:

“This book of covenant... affirms the conciliar principle and connectionalism as distinctive marks of United Methodist ecclesiology, makes clear the global character of the Church’s mission, and declares interdependence with other Christian bodies both in spirit and cooperation.”

Furthermore, paragraph 125 emphasizes our connectional covenant that helps us build mutual support and accountability which are so vital to our interactive relationships as disciples of Jesus Christ in God’s mission:

¶ 125. United Methodists throughout the world are bound together in a connectional covenant in which we support and hold each other accountable for faithful discipleship and mission. Integrally holding connectional unity and local freedom, we seek to proclaim and embody the gospel in ways responsible to our specific cultural and social context while maintaining “a vital web of interactive relationships” (¶ 132)... Our worldwide connectional relationship is one of the ways we carry out our missional calling beyond national and regional boundaries. For our connectionalism to become a living practice, we need to carry the worldwide nature of The United Methodist Church deep into the life and mission of our local congregations. Only when we commit ourselves to interdependent worldwide partnerships in prayer, mission, and worship can connectionalism as the Wesleyan ecclesial vision be fully embodied. Guided by the Holy Spirit, United Methodist churches throughout the world are called afresh into a covenant of mutual commitment based on shared mission, equity, and hospitality.

We live in a time of great opportunities! It was a great blessing for Eurasian pastors and leaders to experience the School of Congregational Development in Tallin, Estonia in September 2015 along with our sisters and brothers from the Nordic and Baltic countries. We were blessed to have Bishop Christian Alsted in our Moscow Seminary for a course on Christian missions. His inspirational teaching and challenge to our students helps us to be the church in mission. I am very grateful to our seminary in Tallinn for inviting me to teach students from Baltic countries about church leadership. Furthermore, we thank God for the fruitful relationships between sisters and brothers from Finland and Northwest Russia Annual Conference. We also thank our sisters and brothers from the Baltic countries for their missionary work in Russia and their visits to us. And we are especially grateful to Ullas Tankler from GBGM who continues to build our good connectional ties and make us feel united in our mission. These are just a few examples of celebrating connectional UMC.

Building on positive experience of this quadrennium, let me suggest the following steps that can help our connection become stronger in the next four years:

1. Send mission teams to help start new churches and encourage existing congregations
2. Be more intentional in prayer for each other across the Central Conference
3. Invite pastors, professors and lay leaders across annual conferences and Episcopal areas to share their experience
4. Improve communication and exchange of information about plans to visit each other's conferences and Episcopal areas
5. Help young people build stronger relationships by visiting camps and retreats outside their own annual conference and Episcopal area
6. Use social media to share information about fruitful ministries, disciple making and events
7. ... please, suggest more ideas.

Question for reflection: *What can we do as United Methodists in Northern Europe and Eurasia Central Conference can do to build on our connectional nature of the church? How can we help each other to be more committed in our mission?*

Conclusion

As we live, move and exist in God, how are we to grow as mission movement in our countries? How do we continue on Apostle Paul's courage, creativity and purpose-driven gospel sharing when we encounter secularism and hostility in our own contexts? We pray that as United Methodists in Northern Europe and Eurasia we will continue to grow in hope, creativity and courage.

People need hope. In today's world the Christian message of God's forgiving love and grace is relevant as never before. People are tired of wars, displacement and insecurity. Even in so called developed countries people struggle to find meaning in life and a reason to continue with their lives. Hope is what we as United Methodists bring to people as we feed the migrants, encourage the orphans, feed the poor, educate children and youth. Hope is what we multiply when we worship Jesus Christ every Sunday in our churches and homes. Hope is what transforms a sinner into a joyful servant of God. Let us continue to grow in hope and to share this hope with our neighbors!

Creativity is God's gift. We are born with it. Look at the children and how they can imagine new things with their toys. God has created us with amazing potential for creativity. With our creativity we can try new things, practice fresh expressions, strengthen our connection in ways that have never been possible before. Let us continue to encourage one another in our creative ways and affirm our God's given gifts in each other. It is amazing what God can do through a church that is creative!

Courage is what characterized the apostles of Jesus Christ. Courage was characteristic of the early Methodists who traveled on horses to the unknown territories. The world needs United Methodists people who are crazy enough to challenge the status quo and go into risky mission. Let us continue the mission movement with hope, creativity and courage as we live, move and exist in God. May God bless us all! Amen.

Prayerfully submitted

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Bishop of the Eurasia Area

Christian Alsted

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ⁱ Charles Van Engen, *Missions on the Way: Issues in Mission Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1997).

ⁱⁱ Book of Discipline, paragraph 102

ⁱⁱⁱ Magnus Malm, *Som om Gud inte finns*, 2015, 109

^{iv} Magnus Malm, *Som om Gud inte finns*, 2015, 110

^v Statement from the Council of Bishops Executive Committee, bishop Bruce Ough, 25. July 2016

^{vi} John Wesley, Sermon 75 On Schism, 15 <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-75-on-schism/>

^{vii} Eddie Gibbs, *Church Next*, 2000, 73

^{viii} <http://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>