

Now it sprouts up...



## The Episcopal Address & The Laity Address

2012 Northern Europe and Eurasia Central Conference  
Kaunas, Lithuania





## *Episcopal Address*

*Look! I'm doing a new thing; now it sprouts up; don't you recognize it?*

A local church had 0 to 5 children in worship. They decided purposefully to focus their worship and worship every week.

An annual conference has received support from the outside for several years. The conference embraced the calling of some people to start mission among unreached ethnic groups in a neighboring country. This bold step is changing the conference's self perception from being a receiver of support to becoming a church in mission to the world.

A local church is building on its strength in music ministry and ministering to hundreds of unchurched people. Through the many new people joining the church is being transformed.

An annual conference wanted to reopen in a city where there had been Methodist churches before World War Two. After contacts with other churches, they came to the conclusion that the city didn't need another small Protestant congregation. But outside the city was a village where the only Christian activity was a visiting missionary in the summer, so they decided to go where people needed them.

Some years ago they hardly had any elders, but the few leaders were faithful and passed on the leadership to younger leaders. Today this annual conference in spite of their low salaries attract new pastors, they start new churches and last year their membership increased by 5%.

An inner city church is transforming to become multicultural and reaching out to the community with ministries for refugees many of them Muslim, with international student ministries, open church and much more. So far two United Methodist congregations are worshipping in the same facility.

In times of massive national tragedy as it was experienced in Oslo and at Utøya in Oslo<sup>1</sup> in the summer of 2011, and after the tragic accident in a United Methodist Church in L'viv in Ukraine<sup>2</sup> in 2012



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we have seen pastors and deacons and local churches expressing Christ's love in offering care and support to surviving victims and to families and friends grieving the loss of their loved ones, as well as to many others affected by the tragedy.

The founder of a small local church was retiring and for a year no new appointment was available. But an assistant pastor, a lay leader and their families from a congregation in the district decided to move there, find new jobs and continue the ministry as well as creating new contacts.

A few committed people with a burning heart are leading their annual conference in one impressive mission project after the other supplying running water to villages in Africa.

Another annual conference is partnering with the national relief organization and with indigenous partners in running approximately 60 projects in different countries in Africa.

A local church had difficulties to reach out in the big city. They put up an attractive website and are active on social media, and as a result new people have joined the church.

A small declining church is experiencing the joy of reaching new people through an unexpected large Alpha course.

A local church saw the need for a new church in a suburb, they began praying, vision was born and they began preparing for a new church start. A year later the church plant was launched based on small groups, passionate worship and focused on young families with children. Another year later the new church was formed.

A pastor had a summerhouse in a village in the middle of nowhere with no Christian ministry. He started an outpost there, and this summer the first three persons from the village were baptized.

These snapshots are not from America, England or Korea. They are from among our midst in Northern Europe and Eurasia. Together they are one part of the reality that we need to recognize. Jesus Christ is at work in the Northern Europe and Eurasia Central Conference.

Another part of the reality that is equally important to recognize is the fact that all is not well with the United Methodist soul of Northern Europe and Eurasia. Too many churches, programs and leaders, too many United Methodists are satisfied with the second best. We have a tendency to deny our potential instead of stepping out in faith. We find it less demanding to defend and even glorify the status quo than aiming for higher goals and working intensively. Or we put the blame of our situation on our secular context, our religious context or on the financial circumstances, instead of looking for constructive solutions and new ways forward in making the best of our God-given resources.



Recognizing this our two-folded reality - grace and frustration, chaos and kairos<sup>3</sup>, hope and disillusion - is a good starting point for a church that wants to reclaim its movement.

## On the Move

Following Jesus is to be on the move. The first Jesus followers were never in one place for a longer period of time, they were moving on to the next place to new needs, new people, new challenges and new experiences of grace. There is nothing static about Jesus. He called his disciples to follow, not to be with him or to stay with him, but to be moving with him. He never settled down. He never stayed in one place for a longer time. Much of what the gospel accounts took place, when they were on the move. Most of the parables were told when the band of disciples was travelling with Jesus, or when they made a short stop. Many of the healings took place when they met people on the way. In fact movement was so prominent in Christ's teaching and in following him as a disciple, that the name they chose for the early followers were "The Way", they were the people of the Way.<sup>4</sup>

"Way" becomes even more significant when we consider, that Christ refers to himself as "The Way, the truth and the life."<sup>5</sup> Being a Christian is to live in the Way, in Christ. To follow the Way, is to live according to Christ's teaching and example. To be on the Way, is to be continually transformed by Christ's grace in the community of other followers. And to prepare the Way, is to share Christ with others and to be in ministry with the poor and marginalized.

John Wesley and his coworkers lived out this reality in a radical way. They became the Methodist movement!

## Minority in a Majority Culture

Across the 9 time zones of the Northern Europe and Eurasia Central Conference most of our churches exist in a context of institutionalized expressions of Christianity, no matter if it is Orthodox, Roman Catholic or Lutheran. Generally people expect the church to offer little more than worship, baptisms, confirmations, weddings and funerals. For many years our countries have been considered Christian countries. As expressed by retired Bishop of the Lutheran Church in Denmark, Jan Linhardt, "When you scratch the surface of a Dane, you will find a Christian underneath." But challenged around the time when Methodism first reached the shore of the Nordic countries by philosopher Soeren Kirkegaard, who in his struggle against the state church dismissed the existence of



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genuine New Testament Christianity in the Church of Denmark. One of his points was that if all are Christians no one is a Christian.

While Methodism originally was a missional movement, an alternative and often critical to established Christianity, we have become as institutional as any of the majority churches in our countries. Looking at church history and sociology this may not seem so strange, as revivalistic movements appear to have a lifecycle taking them towards institutionalism. Which has certainly happened in the Nordic countries particularly since the 1950's.

In Eurasia and the Baltics where Methodism was reintroduced in 1990's<sup>6</sup> the most significant influence was from the mainline United Methodist Church in the United States, and even though the emphasis was evangelistic the way to do church was institutional. State recognition, or at least public recognition as a Christian denomination, became an important issue. In both Eurasia and the Baltics we have several examples of the church being treated as a sect by the government, and even worse being openly opposed and accused for all kinds of things by local church leaders in the majority church. But much more worrying is the fact, that many local churches in Eurasia and the Baltics, where with the exception of Estonia even the oldest churches are no more than 20 years old, have the mindset of a stale established church and express very little desire for change and renewal. They have stopped reaching out to the community, and they are declining.

What we may not have realized is that along with becoming a mainline institutional church, we have also left our theological basis. We are Methodists but we are not quite sure what this exactly means. We are always ready to answer the question, "what is the difference between your church and the majority church?" And doing so, we describe ourselves more as non-Lutheran or non-Orthodox, than positively Wesleyan. We talk about baptism and about being independent from the state. We may offer some words about grace, and we may mention the Social Principles as a major contribution to what it means to live as Christians in the world - which is true. What we however tend to forget, is that Grace is foundational, not additional, and that the Social Principles flow from our theology, they are not basic in our theology.

In our official statements we are very clear that our primary purpose is "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." But when we try to express what our theology means put into practice, how we implement disciple-making, and what kind of transformation we are looking for, we tend to get academic or just fuzzy.



## Half Empty or Half Full

What do you see, and what do you think, when you look at your church? How we perceive our situation determines our self-image which in turn shapes our future. If we emphasize our smallness, our lack of resources, our few successes and years of decline, we feed a self-image of being a dying church, we lose hope and courage, and there is no future. We could instead see our smallness as an asset. As a small and nimble church we can make decisions and implement significant changes fairly swiftly. Compared to our size we have a remarkable amount of resources, and we do significant ministry in the Nordic, Baltic and Eurasia area and across the world. We have several success stories to share, and many more will come. We have been declining, but most of our conferences have plateaued and some are beginning to grow. So take heart, there is hope and God is leading us into a new future. “ So what do you see – is the glass half empty or half full?

The world has changed and we are not keeping up.

– And yet several of our churches are innovatively looking for new ways to reach out to people

We are closing churches and the empty seats are alarming

– And yet we are beginning to start new churches and the momentum is growing.

We are growing grey and young people are absent in many churches

– And yet we see churches that are purposeful in changing to reaching children and youth, and they are successful

We have been declining fiscally, numerically, and most importantly, spiritually

– And yet in all conferences there are churches that are growing financially, numerically and most importantly spiritually

We want to keep the two-folded reality we described in the beginning alive. We want to be vision minded and to emphasize the positive opportunities rather than being consumed by defeat. We see significant moves to towards becoming a more vital church.

At the same time we also want to be realistic and true, particularly when it comes to perhaps the most crucial area: Generally we are not in a significant way making or becoming disciples of Jesus Christ - what we see are the promising “sprouts”.



## From Monument to Movement

George G. Hunter III<sup>7</sup> in his book “The Recovery of a Contagious Methodist Movement” reflects on what it will take to move Methodism out of institutionalism and back to what Martin Atkins calls “a disciple making movement shaped for mission”<sup>8</sup>. Hunter points to 4 themes: Wesleyan theology, lay ministries, small groups and missional Christianity.<sup>9</sup>

He points to the Wesleyan Quadrilateral in its original form as described by theologian Albert Outler and in our part of the world emphasized by dr. Thorvald Källstad, scripture, tradition, experience and reason, where scripture in good Wesleyan tradition was considered the primary source in theological reflection.

Dr. Hunter alludes to a sermon preached by Albert Outler at Baltimore’s Lovely Lane Church during General Conference 1984 in which dr. Outler identified three main themes in Wesley’s theology: Original Sin, Grace and Sanctification. He said that American Methodism has produced 2 great movements, the 19<sup>th</sup> century Holiness movement and the 20<sup>th</sup> century Liberalism, and he considered both of them by 1984 spent forces. The holiness movement was spent because they emphasized the first and the third themes but forgot the second, while liberalism was spent because they focused on the second but forgot the first and the third.

We might think, that the task ahead would be to refocus our theology, but this is only part of the challenge. It is not only helpful but necessary, for us to carefully evaluate, what is being preached and taught in our churches, and to consider what we need to teach and preach today. We have been off course for so long, that we have developed new patterns of being church. We have adopted the current understanding from the majority churches, that all we have to do is to have good worship, to perform baptisms, confirmation, weddings and funerals, and as we don’t have to many religious ceremonies we supplement with different kinds of activities and ministries.

In Methodism, theology and life is developed in a creative tension. In “Our Doctrinal Heritage” puts it like this: “These emphases have been preserved not so much through formal doctrinal declarations as through the vital movement of faith and practice as seen in converted lives and within the disciplined life of the church. Devising formal definitions of doctrine has been less pressing for United Methodists than summoning people to faith and nurturing them in the knowledge and love of God.”<sup>10</sup>

Theology grew out of reading the scriptures and studying the church fathers, it was informed by experience and evaluated by reason - and experience and reason pushed Wesley back to study scripture and tradition again. Theological thinking was dynamic, the Methodist leaders would think, pray and reason together, and they might reach a preliminary conclusion, but they would continue



to think, experience and learn and to be open for new insight. At the same time they were developing their thinking and their practice on how to lead the revival God had given them to lead.

## Reclaiming the Ministry of the Laity

From the very beginning of the Methodist movement lay people were leading most of the ministries that mattered. The vast majority of the preachers were lay preachers. Lay people were leaders of the classes for new believers and seekers, and for the bands of devoted Methodists. The clergy traveled around preached, supervised the lay leaders and administered the sacraments.

This was even true when Methodism came to the Northern Europe in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. But it changed. In the 1960's and 1970's there was a strong move in the Methodist Church in the US to become main line which implied giving up on our Wesley revivalistic heritage, becoming more clergy centered and put a much stronger emphasis on worship. This move had some affect in the Nordic countries, and we saw a similar move towards becoming a free church alternative to the established church. We were looking for acceptance and in our efforts we lost a clear sense of identity. Many of our churches have to a significant extent been influenced by Methodism from the United States. And while the churches, organizations and individuals acted out of good heart, to a large extent they brought mainline Methodism, and the emphasis was on building the Church, having the proper kind of worship according to the Hymnal and the Book of Worship, having churches served by pastors and paid staff to do the ministry.

Every congregation doesn't need a pastor, but every faith community needs committed leadership. Figures from the US show that while membership from 1968 to 2005 has decreased by 27%, the number of clergy has increased by 36%<sup>11</sup>. The figures are not exactly the same in this Central Conference, but we see the same trend. Particularly in the Baltics and in Eurasia there is a disproportionate number of clergy compared to the number of members. While previously most pastors would serve in several small churches assisted by several lay preachers and other leaders, pastors today tend to serve in one church where they do most of the ministry.

We need to focus on and lift up the ministry of the laity and particularly the ministry of lay preachers<sup>12</sup>, this is crucial to our future growth and development. If we need a pastor to start new faith communities or plant a new church, we will not be able to grow. We will not be able to train a sufficient number of pastors, we will not be able to afford it, and most importantly we will not build healthy new churches.



## Healthy Churches

“Forward by making new faith communities with new people”, was the closing statement of the 2009 Central Conference. We affirm the validity of this statement in leading the United Methodist Church in Northern Europe and Eurasia into the future. Craig Kennet Miller, who has taught on several occasions throughout the Nordic and Baltic area, defines a faith community as composed of two interrelated components, a worship experience and a discipleship system.<sup>13</sup>

Worship emphasizes proclamation. The church and the believer invite the world to come to the church to hear the gospel whether it is proclaimed through preaching, liturgy or sacrament. The focus is on the event of worship, rather than on the process of discipleship. In a discipleship based church, the Christ followers bring the gospel to the world and invite people to come to the group for faith formation. Worship and discipleship is rarely in balance. In most of our churches worship has priority, and the worship service is perceived as the primary means of mission. In fact worship is the only functioning activity in most of our small churches. If the worship service was closed down, the church would disappear from one day to the other. However a worshipping church without a discipleship system is a caricature of the biblical understanding of church.

In modern day Methodism we value small groups and bible studies, and they are usually offered as a ministry of the church. We have churches with small group ministries, but rarely do we anymore have churches composed of small groups.

In the early Methodist movement the purpose of preaching was to open people’s hearts and minds to the gospel. The altar call was a much later invention.

People who were revived through the preaching were invited to become part of a class. The classes were led by lay people, and they were composed of a mix of seekers, new Christians and mature Christians. The purpose was personal accountability for people desiring to live a new life, to do good, do no harm and to stay in love with God. The classes were engaged in ministry and witness. They were not bible study groups. The early Methodists believed they were modeling the “koinonia”<sup>14</sup> of the New Testament through the classes, and thus it was a requirement for all members to be in a class. The classes were the place for people to commit themselves to Christ, and in that way they have similarities with today’s Alpha courses.

In addition to the classes Wesley created “the bands”, to be quite homogenous group the devoted Christ followers could join to grow in their spiritual walk. In the bands intensive studies of scripture and prayer took place – again led by lay people.



Leaders were developed in classes and bands. The people would discern each other's gifts for ministry, challenge each other to grow, support, help and pray for each other

The classes and bands were developed out of experience and the need to accommodate and sustain the revival, and it is important to note that Methodist theology of salvation as a process, sanctification, cannot be properly understood nor lived without this accountable discipleship system.

We do have small groups, recovery groups, self-help groups, prayer groups, bible study groups – however just organizing people in small groups is not going to help people grow in their life with Christ. Small groups are not the magic fertilizer that makes people and churches grow, it is what goes on in those small groups that determine the impact.

This is not a sentimental move back to the good old days, this is an experience based statement consistent with our Wesleyan theology. Each of our local churches need to find the balance between worship and discipleship system, there are no short cuts – this balance will determine the health of the church in the future.

## Reclaiming the Mission

Wesley believed that God raised up the people called Methodists “To reform the nation, particularly the church, and to spread scriptural holiness over the land” This gave the Methodists a distinctive identity and mission. It was not to become a church, it was to rethink church. It was to move the emphasis from what happens around the altar to what happens in and among people. It was not to register the average worship attendance, it was to expect reports of transformation like, “The Lord’s power was with them, and a large number came to believe and turned to the Lord. When the church in Jerusalem heard about this, they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw evidence of God’s grace, he was overjoyed and encouraged everyone to remain fully committed to the Lord.”<sup>15</sup>

The mission of The United Methodist Church in Northern Europe and Eurasia is not to be successful and recognized in the society. Our mission is along with other Christians to be part of Christ’s redeeming and transforming work in people’s lives, in the society and in the world. To “spread scriptural holiness” is to grow together and as Christ followers intentionally influence the society “to do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with your God”<sup>16</sup>

Methodists engage in recovery groups and rehabilitation among people with addictions. We could go one step further and try to influence the drinking patterns in our societies that ruin families and



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the life and future of many children and young people. Getting drunk every weekend is not cool, it is potentially destroying lives.

Along with migration racism is showing its ugly face. – In debate on the internet, in newspapers and even from politicians we read generalizing and prejudice statements about ethnic minority groups not least about romas and about muslims. Racist attacks in our streets are not uncommon. Many of our churches have made great efforts in embracing different ethnic groups and the cultural encounters have enriched their fellowship – more churches could do the same. We could go one step further and make our voice heard in the public debate as well as when we hear racist comments in our workplace or among friends. We could even go yet another step in building relationships to the marginalized and purposefully reach out to them.

“So, brothers and sisters, because of God’s mercies, I encourage you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice that is holy and pleasing to God. This is your appropriate priestly service. 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.”<sup>17</sup>

Our mission is to be a part of God’s mission to love creation and humanity back to him. “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won’t perish but will have eternal life.”<sup>18</sup> And according to Jesus this eternal life doesn’t start after the physical death. Instead, “whoever hears my word and believes in the one who sent me has eternal life and... has passed from death into life.” Around us from Esbjerg in Denmark to Vladivostok in Russia and from Hammerfest in Norway to Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan people perish in confusion and self-destruction, because so many of them have lost both foundation and direction for their lives. It is our mission not to wait for them to come to the church, but to actually “see them..., be moved with compassion..., bring them to a safe place..., and take care of them”<sup>19</sup>. It is our mission to go “to the highways and back alleys and urge people to come”<sup>20</sup> to Jesus. It is our mission to offer them Christ in order to come back home, to restore their relation to God and help them on “The Way” with Jesus.

This requires more than a new ministry program and more than another sermon series by the pastor. It requires not a new way of thinking, but a re-newed way of thinking. It requires spiritual openness and spiritual depth. This requires energy and new priorities. But this is our mission, and this is the mission we want to reclaim.

## Renovation not Redecoration

We are calling for renovation not redecoration. Bright colors on the walls, a new carpet and some



fresh flowers in a vase are not going to do it. This is much more than tweaking a program, changing the design of a website, putting up a screen and a projector in the sanctuary or turning up the amplifiers. Renovation goes deeper, it uncovers the damp in the floor, the bad pipes in the walls and the holes in the roof. Renovation tears down walls and builds for the future. Scripture has several expressions of renovation, “repentance”<sup>21</sup>, “born from above”<sup>22</sup>, “be transformed”<sup>23</sup>, and they all go deep.

To fully reclaim our mission we need to look carefully behind the walls and under the floor on how we function as a church, what our priorities are, where and how we use our resources, and how this all relates to our purpose and vision. We must ask scary questions like: What must we stop doing? What must we do in a different way? What must we begin to do? Local churches may need outside help in this process.

The United Methodist Church in Norway has led the way by expressing an unambiguous vision and adopting bold goals for the future with a clear strategy.

Under the title: The United Methodist Church in Norway is people with open minds, open hearts and open doors. The vision says what they desire to be:

“A relevant, open and vital church, where people find faith and a sense of belonging, and are equipped to ministry as followers of Jesus.”

Local churches are categorized in four colors, and the emphasis is on challenging and giving each church the opportunity to grow and develop to the next level. In this process a number of strategic steps are suggested and a variety of tools are offered.

Furthermore the following goals are set:

- To double the number of members received through confession and through baptism annually by 2016.
- To plant 6 new churches before 2016 of which 3 have become local churches.
- To have at least 2-3 candidates for ministry under the age of 30 start education annually and in addition have 2-3 new local pastors every year.
- Increase the average number of people in worship by 10% 2012-2013 and by 20% 2014-2016.



Renovating the church requires major changes in focus, in the way we lead, in the way we prioritize resources, and in accountability.

### The Challenge

We are extremely clear about our purpose to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. We even say, that “The local church provides the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs.”<sup>24</sup> We realize our diversity present in the Northern Europe and Eurasia Central Conference, and yet in spite of our very diverse contexts, we share similar challenges. To reclaim our mission as the United Methodist Church in the Nordic, Baltic and Eurasian countries our purpose must determine our focus and priorities ....

- We must have our focus outside of the church among the people Christ loves - and we must study our culture and experiment to find ways to minister in the culture.
- All leaders clergy and lay must have a clear understanding of how discipling takes place and what their leading role is in this.
- All local churches must know how they make disciples in their specific context, they must have a compelling vision of the future, set unambiguous goals and have a clear strategy for how to obtain their goals.
- All local churches must know their answers to the following questions: Why do people need Jesus? Why do people need the church? Why do people need our particular church?
- We must start new faith communities and plant new churches. The first steps have been taken, now we must build on our experiences.
- We must align the education and training of leaders, deacons and pastors locally and nationally with our purpose – we need change agents, church planters and innovative leaders
- We must move from being a clergy driven church to becoming a church led by lay and clergy in teams. The clergy must release the lay to take leadership; and the lay must reclaim leadership and responsibility in the church.
- We must be purposeful about being church with children and youth
- We must practice mutual accountability on all levels



- And finally what all this means must be described in very concrete and tangible ways to enable Methodists on all levels of the church to get involved.

This is the task ahead, and it is going to require us to give our best in prayer, discernment and action, and it will stretch us to the limits of our ability and strength. Our calling comes from the Jesus Christ, the Way, who is making a way in the desert, paths in the wilderness, and more than that, he has put water in the desert, streams in the wilderness to give water to his people.<sup>25</sup>

Let us reclaim our mission, let us get moving...

*Prayerfully submitted*

*Hans Växby  
Bishop of The Eurasia Area*

*Christian Alsted  
Bishop of The Nordic & Baltic Area*

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- 1 On 22nd July 2011 one person exploded a bomb in the government district in Oslo, Norway and later the same day he killed and injured a large number of youth at island Utøya. A total of 77 people were killed and hundreds injured in this national tragedy.
  - 2 On 10th July 2012 a roof of a church collapsed during renovation, several people were killed and injured.
  - 3 Kairos (καιρός) greek word meaning the right or opportune moment
  - 4 Acts 9:2; 18:25f; 19:9; 19:23; 22:4; 24:14; 24:22
  - 5 Joh.14:6
  - 6 In Estonia the United Methodist Church continued to exist during the Soviet occupation but after the fall of the iron curtain, there was a strong missional effort and support from the United States
  - 7 George Hunter is Distinguished Professor, Emeritus of Asbury Theological Seminary's School of World Mission and Evangelism
  - 8 General Secretary in the Methodist Church in the UK in his message to the 2011 annual conference



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- 9 Page 7ff
- 10 NEEBoD ¶ 101 “Our Doctrinal Heritage”
- 11 Association of Religion Data Archives, “Evangelical Lutheran Church in America,” [www.thearda.com/Denoms/D\\_1415.asp](http://www.thearda.com/Denoms/D_1415.asp) and “United Methodist Church,” [www.thearda.com/Denoms/D\\_1469.asp](http://www.thearda.com/Denoms/D_1469.asp)
- 12 The title “lay preacher” as the ministry of lay preaching has disappeared from the BoD , today the term is “Lay Servant”.
- 13 Craig K. Miller: NextChurch.Now
- 14 Koinonia is a Greek word that occurs 20 times in the Bible. Koinonia’s primary meaning is “fellowship, sharing in common, communion.” The first occurrence of koinonia is Acts. 2:42 – the early Methodist saw the classmeeting as a true expression of koinonia.
- 15 Acts 11:21-23
- 16 Micah 6:8
- 17 Rom 12:1-2
- 18 John 3:16
- 19 Luke 10:33-34
- 20 Luke 14:23
- 21 Mark 1:14
- 22 John 3:3
- 23 Romans 12:2
- 24 NEEBoD ¶ 201
- 25 Isaiah 43: 19 and 20



## *Laity address*

*I'm walking across a bridge, the bridge of my childhood. There is a large gap between the planks of the bridge, and a small foot could easily stumble between the planks. On each side of the bridge there is murky water. I'm thinking that a person would just disappear, if he were to fall in. I am attentive to both the wide gap between the planks and the murky water beneath, and I struggle to stay on top, to stay on the bridge of my childhood.*

God's mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. It is our job to participate in God's mission by proclaiming the gospel and by following the commandments to love God and our neighbor. "People find that the church has nothing to offer them today. The church seems irrelevant."<sup>1</sup> If that's the case, how do we make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world? How do we translate the gospel to a language that can be heard, seen, understood and received by the present generation?

While preparing the laity address I was in contact with 20 lay people from the Nordic and Baltic countries – young and elderly, men and women, coming from small church plantings and big vital congregations, all involved in different ministries in our church.

As a church we do a lot of good things – and sometimes with success! We are good at welcoming people, making them feel at home in our church and including them in our fellowship. We have a lot of good activities and ministries – choirs, scout groups and camps – that build relationships and strengthen our fellowship. And we prioritize training and educating our pastors and lay leaders. This is a blessing!

But from what I hear, and from what I see, we also face challenges today. It seems like we are walking on a bridge, afraid to stumble and fall into the murky water. If we are to be a church that makes disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, we have to face these challenges.

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Lay person, Denmark.



The situation of the church in the Nordic and Baltic countries is of course very diverse, and making disciples will have a variety of challenges in different contexts. I cannot address every single situation. However, I will point to this: We are united in spite of our differences. We are united in Christ. We are one United Methodist Church. That is why we are gathering at this Central Conference. We are gathering because we all take part in God's mission – and being together in this place we should be full of hope, because this is the promise God has given us:

“For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”<sup>2</sup>

Heavenly Father, I pray that you will give us wisdom to understand the situation of the church as it is today. I pray that your holy presence will guide us in our discussions and decisions. Give us courage and inspiration. Be among us and touch our hearts and minds with your grace. And let us at all times remember what you have told us: “If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.”<sup>3</sup>

### People Forging New Relationships

In many ways our church does not relate to the present generation, and we do not face the emergent culture as it is. We are not connecting or communicating with people in our communities. This is a great challenge.

In Denmark about 40 per cent of all marriages ends in a divorce. We see the same tendency in Sweden, Norway, Finland and Lithuania. Only Latvia and Estonia do not have the same high divorce numbers. A lot can be said about divorces but one thing is clear: A lot of marriages end in a break-up, and it is often a tragedy for both mum, dad and those children involved.

What we see is that the broken relationships are followed by new relationships and arrangements: People, that have been divorced, start dating and find a new partner. The couple move in together – both with his and her children – and they live happily together, maybe not ‘ever after’, but at least until a new break-up occurs. Or people, that have been divorced, become members of a still larger club of singles, single men and women, who live alone – not in marriages, not even in couples –

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2           Jeremiah 29:11-13.

3           Matthew 21:22.



maybe because they are incapable of such<sup>4</sup>. Or it may even happen that a man finds a man, and a woman finds a woman.

A lot of people have become part of this modern way of life. And sometimes it feels like one big mess. At least when you, like I have, have grown up with a mum and dad that met 30 years ago, fell in love, got married, had seven children and still to this day live happily together.

The church is where couples go to get married. Our church welcomes married couples, the traditional family. But where is the church when it comes to break-ups, divorces, new relationships (also with people of the same sex) and the single life? How does our church meet those who are single, homosexual, divorced or dating boyfriend number 30? Should the church, just to give one example, help married couples to prevent getting divorced and mediate when the break-up has taken place?

As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people. Therefore come out from them and be separate."<sup>5</sup> The Lord has spoken, and it is still relevant for us today. Our church has to face the modern way of life. But how? When meeting the present generation, what, then, is negotiable and what is not? How can we come out from the world and still be separate from the world?

## The Dualism of Life and the World

A challenge for our church is to reach out to children and young adults and stay in contact with the children and young adults that are already in our church. It is a challenge that has our priority, because we wish for them to know Jesus Christ, our Lord. Not because children are tools we can use, bringing the gospel to the parents. Not because children are the future of the church, bringing the gospel to the next generations. But simply because the kingdom of God belongs to them: "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these."<sup>6</sup>

I know young people whom I have grown up with in the church. Their parents came to church, just like my parents, and we came along. As time went by, we were no longer children. We became teenagers, and it gradually became more and more difficult for us to find our place in the church. We noticed a way of living outside the church – and we noticed that it did not correspond with the way of living inside the church.

4 Matthew 19:12.

5 2. Corinthians 6:16-17.

6 Mark 10:14.



In Denmark I see a minority of young Muslims that live a dualistic life. On the one hand, they live a traditional, religious life, and on the other hand, they live a modern, liberated life. A consequence of a dualistic lifestyle often is that you slip from one to the other. It may happen without anyone noticing, but it happens.

Are we asking our young adults in the church to live such a dualistic life? If we do, it can give the individual concerns of a more existential matter. And the result might be that the young adults gradually slip away from the church and “dump” God, or are absorbed by the church and become isolated from the outside world.

The kingdom of God belongs to the children. But when looking around, our children and youth are in many places absent or hidden away in our churches. In today’s world, how do we lead children and young adults to Jesus Christ? How do we help children and young adults to avoid slipping away from the church? How do we make room for every generation in our church? And how do we create a church that reduces division in life and provides people with a greater meaning and wholeness?

### The Perfect Person

In the emergent culture there is a predominant discourse about perfection. We want to be perfect: Perfect marriages, perfect children, perfectly decorated houses with perfect gardens, perfect jobs with perfect pension schemes, perfect, perfect, perfect...

I am not perfect. It is hard to admit when you want to be perfect. But I am not perfect. I have gone through personal crisis... And it just doesn’t happen to perfect people! I remember one time when I was very unhappy. I cried a lot. But still hope wouldn’t leave me. Every morning when I showered, the sun would come shining through the window, and the sunshine would blend with the water drops and leave me in a shower of gold. I was showering in gold!

Where does that hope come from? Where does that strength come from? I know where it comes from. It comes from God. And I know that when I am confronted with my own un-perfect self I can go to God. I can tell him about my biggest mistakes and leave my failure with him. He can carry it, and he holds me and whispers in my ear: “Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you.”<sup>7</sup>



My hope comes from God. From him comes my strength.<sup>8</sup> But what about people who have never met God? What do they do when they are confronted with a personal crisis? Where do they go with their biggest mistakes, failures and un-perfect self? To whom do they turn?

In God's kingdom there is room for everyone. But is there room for everyone in our church? I often hear that we want to be a church for everyone. I cannot help thinking: Who is this everyone? The general picture is that we choose to connect with people who think like us, act like us, and look like us.

We experience anxiety when it comes to getting too close to the un-perfect person. And especially, we are afraid of getting in too close proximity to the "lepers" of our time: money swindlers, prostitutes, pedophiles, addicts, psychopaths. Jesus helped the lepers – the un-perfect people of that time – and we should do the same today: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."<sup>9</sup> How can our church meet today's un-perfect person? How do we reach out to the lepers of our time?

## Walk Out of the Church!

This summer I went kayaking in Sweden with my family. Every day we camped on a new island. One evening I prepared the bonfire and rolled a stone. Hundreds and hundreds of ants hid under the stone. There was a stir in the group of ants – they immediately started moving when the stone was moved. I went to look for branches to put on the bonfire. When I came back, the ants were gone, all hundreds and hundreds of them! At no time, they had moved to another place.

There is a great mobility and flexibility in our society, but we don't see the same mobility and flexibility in our church. "Buildings and habits tend to hinder us from seeing the needs in a changing society only a few kilometres away. We find it difficult to close a church in an area where people are moving out and starting new faith communities in areas where people are moving in."<sup>10</sup>

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8 Psalm 118:14.

9 Mark 2:17.

10 Bishop Hans Växby, 2009.



## Episcopal Address and Laity Address 2012

"Christians do not walk into the church. Christians walk out of the church."<sup>11</sup> For a long time we have been inside the church. For a long time we have laid passively under a stone. Ants move when their setting changes – but we don't? It is a lukewarm Christianity if it is all about maintaining the church as a building. It is a lukewarm Christianity if it is all about repeating what we have always done. Our faith is not a dead brick. Our faith is a living faith – faith in the risen Christ, which brings salvation to all humankind.<sup>12</sup> "And those congregations that think outside of the church walls can truly see the fruits of the work that is done by Holy Spirit."<sup>13</sup>

So let us get to the main thing: If we want to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, we have to be willing to meet people where they are – also if it means taking chances and moving in new directions. We should have fun, "but you cannot socialize into the kingdom of God."<sup>14</sup> It is our job to build a bridge to our Saviour, our Lord. In everything we do, we have to be strong witnesses of God's love and make disciples of Jesus Christ.

We should focus on creating faith communities for new people. And it does not have to be a big project. Jesus and John Wesley did not "plant churches". They started "small groups" – and it led to new disciples, more people in worship, more leaders and more ministries. When God is calling us, let us plant new faith communities and small groups. Let us start meaningful and relevant activities and ministries. And let us praise and worship in new ways so it can be heard, seen, understood and received by the present generation.

When we see changes in our setting and context, let us respond by moving. In Sweden they formed the new ecumenical church as a response to a critical situation. A crisis is not the end of our church's existence. A crisis can lead to a restart and a refocusing on the mission of the church. A crisis can create a more transformative ministry. It is about time we walk out of the church.

How do we face challenges we meet? Is God calling us to move the church in a new direction? Does God inspire us to meet new people, engage in new ministries, plant new faith communities or worship in new ways? Where have you witnessed transformative change in the church? How can we achieve a more transformative ministry?

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11 Pastor Mark Lewis, Denmark.

12 John 3:16-17.

13 Lay person, Latvia.

14 Lay person, Denmark.



## Be Doers of the Word!

"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says."<sup>15</sup> Our love of God is inextricably linked to love for our neighbor. As United Methodists we want to make a difference by our deeds.

We have a lot of people in our church that serve God and help their neighbor with great commitment and love through their ministry. I can mention Hope Centre in Latvia, a vital youth ministry in Norway, mission and development programs in Liberia and DR Congo, gospel choirs in Denmark, a soup kitchen ministry in Ukraine, just to mention a few.

We see a committed laity, but we also see a lot of people in our congregations that are not yet involved in a ministry. Our pastors do a huge job, but they neither shall nor can do it all. There are functions in the church that calls for laity involvement. A vital church is a church with a committed laity.

Let us focus on motivating everyone in our congregations to engage in ministry. Everyone can serve and take part in God's mission. It is not for the few. Jesus did not choose rich or well-educated followers. The first disciples were fishermen. God also called Moses to be a leader, and Moses became a great leader, though he was not strong either in word or deed. We have to be open. We have to be open for what ministry God is calling us and people around us. "I have realized that it is a great blessing to find your gifts and use them in ministry within the congregation."<sup>16</sup>

What are your gifts? For what ministry is God calling you? What do we experience today that calls for action? How do we find inspiration to continue in our ministry? How do we help and motivate others in the church to find their ministry?

## Say It, Say It Proudly!

The Christian fellowship is the largest fellowship in the world that does not live for itself, but exists for the benefit of others. And it is a fellowship that does not live by itself, but lives solely by the power of the risen Christ. This is something to be proud of. Still, we often get quite, and we find excuses why we should not tell others about our church, and why we should not share our faith with those around us.

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15 James 1:22.

16 Lay person, Denmark.



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As lay people we meet un-churched people every day. We have a unique possibility to share life and testimony with others: Family, friends, schoolmates, colleagues, neighbors, and people we share interests and leisure activities with. Some congregations focus on this form of “friendship evangelization”. My little

sister is especially good at it. She talks far and wide about God. I don’t know anyone like her. I don’t know anyone like her who talks so proudly of her heavenly father. “Every day I am a testimony, and my life outside the church is the most important.”<sup>17</sup>

Do we not confess in the church that we believe in the risen Christ? Why are we, then, so silent outside of the church? It is when we are honest people, it is when we share life and faith, that we can make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. “Let us be proud of Jesus. Let us be strong witnesses of God’s love.”<sup>18</sup> When was the last time you shared your testimony? Who did you tell it to? What led you to share? How did the person respond?

### See the Person

Have you ever been at the playground with a child? And have you ever heard how the child shouts: “Look at me! Look at me!” Unfortunately, adults often reply: “You are so talented!” But this is not what the child asked for. The child asked to be seen.

In our society we tend to focus on competencies and skills.<sup>19</sup> And we also do it in our church. We talk about what we have achieved, and we talk about results. We comment on each other, evaluate each other and judge each other.

The Bible says: “Behold the person”<sup>20</sup>, and a Danish psalm, “Se hvilket menneske”, proclaims the same thing.<sup>21</sup> If people are to meet Jesus Christ, “we have to be present in the present world with the people who are presently around us.”<sup>22</sup> Let us not comment on and judge what other people do. Let us be present with people. Let us see people for who they are. Closed eyes don’t see anything.

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17 Lay person, Denmark.

18 Lay person, Sweden.

19 “Doppler”, Erlend Loe, 2011.

20 John 19:5

21 Lyrics: Hans Anker Jørgensen. Mel.: Merete Wendler. 1987.

22 Bishop Hans Växby, 2009.



Closed eyes don't see greatness in the little things. Open eyes do. Let us see the world the way God does – with open, loving, mild, forgiving, generous eyes. God, give me your eyes.<sup>23</sup>

This summer my little brother went to DR Congo as a volunteer on a water supply project – a project that is founded on a partnership between the United Methodist Church in Denmark and Congo through many years. Life in Congo is like a soap bubble: It is a fragile life, but also a beautiful life, holding the color of the rainbow within it – and with that the promise of a new beginning.<sup>24</sup> People in Congo, and people in other poor areas and conflict areas, are often at the world's periphery, far away from our comfort zone. Still, I think they are shouting at us: "Look at us! Look at us" But do we see them?

We have to be present and see people, also people who are close to us, even in our own congregations. Here we find beautiful, but fragile lives that can burst as well. We fail to care for each other in our congregations, and some lay people are fighting to find a balance in their ministry: "Very often we see a small number of people doing the majority of the voluntary work. Finally, they get tired, give up or something worse happens to them."<sup>25</sup>

"We have to care for each other. We have to give space and allow a break, also in the ministry."<sup>26</sup> How do we support each other in our congregations? How do we avoid our pastors and active lay leaders from burning out? And how do we get better at noticing people, both those who are close to us and those at the world's periphery?

## Plans for Prosperity

The United Methodist Church in the Nordic and Baltic countries is facing various challenges. What I have mentioned are just a few perspectives. We have to face our challenges, but let us not confuse challenges with lack of resources. At the feeding of the five thousand the disciples said to Jesus: "We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish". And Jesus answered them: "Bring them here to me!"<sup>27</sup> The disciples focused on the shortages and lack of resources. Jesus focused on the gifts.

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23 "Give me your eyes", Brandon Heath, 2008.

24 Genesis 9:12-17.

25 Lay person, Estonia.

26 Lay person, Denmark.

27 Matthew 14:13-18.



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Let us do like Jesus: Let us face our challenges as well as our gifts, and we will come to realize that thousands and thousands of people are fed. Let us receive God's blessings and grace, and we shall see how rich we are.

As lay people it is our job to translate the gospel to a language that can be heard, seen, understood and received by the present generation. It is our job to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. This is our mission – let us not forget that – and let us follow the example of Jesus: Walk out of the church, be present in the world, preach the gospel, engage in ministry and praise God.

And let us at all times be full of hope. When walking on the bridge, let us not be afraid to stumble, and let us not focus on the murky water on each side. Let us keep our eyes on the horizon where the bridge ends. Jesus told us: "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."<sup>28</sup> And remembering the words of Paul, we can do everything through him who gives us strength,<sup>29</sup> we are to realize that God's plans are plans of prosperity, of hope and a future.<sup>30</sup>

I thank you God, because you have plans for prosperity. I thank you, because in you we find a future and a hope. I pray for your wonderful world, for your church, for every congregation and every single one of us. Help us, strengthen us, Lord. Let every word we say, every move we make and our very presence in the world lead to you. Heavenly Father and Savior, let us be your light in the world, so people can come to know you. Amen.

*I'm walking across a bridge, the bridge of my childhood. There is a large gap between the planks of the bridge, and a small foot could easily stumble between the planks. On each side of the bridge there is murky water. I'm thinking that a person would just disappear, if he were to fall in. After a while, the planks will stop, the murky water will ebb away, and the bridge of my childhood will end. Have you seen where? The bridge ends at a place where the sun meets the sea, there, where the two converge into a street of pure gold.<sup>31</sup> Eternity.*

*Rebecca Steinvig, layperson, Denmark*

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28 Matthew 28:20.

29 Philippians 4:13.

30 Jeremiah 29:11-13.

31 Revelation 21:21





The United Methodist Church  
The Northern Europe and Eurasia Central Conference