

Minutes from the Extra Session of the Northern Europe and Eurasia Central Conference, Saturday 30th April 2022 09.00-11.30 CET

Agenda

1. Welcome

Bishop Christian Alsted welcomed all the delegates, episcopal guests, Central Conference Council members and members of the Judicial Court to this conference and also greeted those others following the live stream. He reminded those present that conferencing is a means of grace surrounding everything we do with prayer and worship and expecting God to speak to us.

2. Opening Worship

Sarah Tianen led the meeting in worship with the song "It is well". Bishop Hans Växby then led the conference in a devotion over words taken from the prophet Habbakuk 2,20 reflecting over the presence of God in his Temple, Solomon's temple that was soon to be destroyed leaving an empty place. However, there is one Temple that cannot be destroyed, the temple where the Living God is. All present were encouraged to reflect over the Temple in our lives where we are in the presence of God. He is where we are, indeed, there is no place where he isn't. The bishop then quoted from 1 Corinthians 6.19 confirming that our bodies are the Temple of the Holy Spirit and that in this extra session we are in the Holy Temple of God. He then asked in prayer for God's will to be done today.

3. Opening Business

a) Roll call – secretary rev. Ole Birch

The following delegates were present:

Denmark

Jørgen Thaarup
Thomas Risager
Louise Aaen
Andreas Morsbøl
Jonathan Steinvig
Michael Wichman

Norway

Knut Refsdal
Hilde-Marie Øgreid Movafagh
Helene Benedikte Granum Aanestad
Jon Erik Bråthen
Hilde Sanden-Bjønnes
Helen Byholt Lovelace
Dag Martin Østevold
Per Bradley

Audun Westad
Stephanie Buadu
Jon Løvland
Wenche Moe Asmundtveit
Jan Magne Linnsund
Maia Blomhoff Holm
Anders Isnes
Magnus Løvland

Finland S

Sarah Tiainen
Leif Göte Björklund
Nils -Gustav Sahlin
Jenny Jansson
Andreas Alfving
Thomas Westerbom

Finland F

Veli Loponen
Jori Brander
Mika Partanen
Kreetta Heiskari
Säde Loponen
Saara Heimonen

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania

Priit Tamm
Robert Tserenkov
Mark Nelson
Üllas Tankler
Edgars Sneiders (Latvia)
Remigijus Matulaitis (Lithuania)
Ināra Avotina (Latvia)
Marjana Luist
Johanna Margret Ojaots
Tarmo Lilleoja
Meeli Tankler
Kristina Matulaitienė (Lithuania)

Ukraine

Yulia Starodubets
Oleg Starodubets
Alina Hrab
Alexandre Arnaut

Guests

Bishop Patrick Streif

Bishop Harald Rückert
Bishop Hans Växby
Bishop Øystein Olsen
Lasse Svensson –The Uniting Church in Sweden

Judicial Court

Leif-Göte Björklund
Remigijus Matulaitis
Steinar Hjerpseth

Central Conference Council

Ole Birch - secretary
Bettina Pedersen
Edgars Sneiders
Remigijus Matulaitis
Robert Tserenkov
Meeli Tankler
Per-Endre Bjørnevik
Ingull Grefslie
Hilde Marie Movafagh
Svein Veland
Jori Brander
Leif-Göte Björklund
Christian Alsted

Assistant Secretary

Charles Jourdan

The names of the Central Conference delegates from East Russia and Central Asia, North-West Russia and Belarus, Central Russia, South Russia Annual Conferences along with the Northern Europe and Eurasia Central Conference Council Members and Eurasia Area Bishop Khegay were read out, but these persons were not present.

b) Guideline for participants in the online conference (doc. 3b)

The participants were reminded to take the actions noted in this guideline to allow the voting procedures to be adhered to. Instructions were also given concerning the wish to speak to the conference.

c) The legality of the conference (doc. 3c)

Bishop Alsted explained the process that led to the call of the extra central conference. At the Regular Meeting of the Central Conference Council in Tallinn on the 24th March 2022 a motion was passed asking the bishops, before the 1st May 2022, to call a special online session of the Central Conference with the sole purpose to temporarily change the borders of the

episcopal areas in the Central Conference so that the Ukraine and Moldova Provisional Annual Conference can be moved to the Nordic and Baltic episcopal area.

In the minutes of that meeting it was stated that this action was deemed necessary considering the war. This motion was passed with 11 votes in favour, 3 votes against. Not all members of the Council were present in the meeting, and some had left at the time of the voting. The council consists of 17 members plus 2 bishops; 4 Eurasian Members and 1 Finnish Member were not present at the time of voting.

Bishop Alsted then quoted paragraph 542.2 in the Book of Discipline regarding the call for an extra session of the Central Conference:

“Bishops resident in a Central Conference or a majority of them with the concurrence of the Executive Committee or otherwise authorised committee shall have the authority to call an extra session of the Central Conference to be held at the time and place designated.”

After the motion was passed Bishop Alsted asked Bishop Khegay if he was willing to call an extra session, which he declined. Based on the fact that the motion had been passed with a more than 2/3rds majority Bishop Alsted then decided to call an extra session of the Central Conference. An additional factor was the war going on in the Ukraine after Russia had invaded the country.

In response to a call for questions Jørgen Thaarup said he supported the decision, but wondered whether the retired bishops would be willing to comment, since there are only 2 active bishops in this Central Conference and this issue might yet be referred to the Judicial Court by members not present at this meeting. Both Bishop Växby and Bishop Olsen declined to comment since they are not active Bishops.

Bishop Alsted then asked the voting members to affirm the legality of the conference by raising their digital hands. The hands raised confirmed this and there were no objections or abstentions. Bishop Alsted then stated that the members of the conference had therefore confirmed the legality of the conference.

The Book of Discipline has no provisions for the notice given for an extra session of the Central Conference. There are very specific requirements for special sessions of jurisdictional conferences. Here no less than 30 days' notice are required. The call for this extra session of the Central Conference was issued on the 30th of March 2022 which is 31 days before this extra session.

d) Setting the quorum and the bar of the conference

Bishop Alsted said: The BoD only has provisions for a quorum for general conference and for jurisdictional conferences, and in both cases, it takes a majority of the whole number of delegates elected to make a quorum for the transaction of business. The Central Conference has a total of 66 delegates; out of which 50 are present with voting rights. Therefore, we have a quorum allowing for business to commence. The bar was set as the online Zoom meeting with all members having the right to speak but only delegates having the right to vote.

- e) Officers are Bishops Eduard Khegay and Christian Alsted. Bishop Khegay declined to be present. Bishop Patrick Streiff will preside when the motion from the Central Conference Council is dealt with.

Ole Birch was elected without objection as the Secretary for this Extra Session. Charles Jourdan was elected without objection as the Assistant Secretary.

- f) Tellers – voting results will appear on the screen

The Poll Function on screen was to be used for registering the votes and **Kirsten Hastrup was elected as Teller without objection.**

- g) Approval of the Plan of Organization and Rules of Order (doc. 3g)

These were approved without objection.

- h) Approval of agenda

The motion from Central Conference delegates from East Russia and Central Asia, North-West Russia and Belarus, Central Russia, South Russia Annual Conferences along with four Eurasia members of the Northern Europe and Eurasia Central Conference Council Members and Eurasia Area Bishop Khegay would be read out under Agenda point 4.

The agenda was approved without objection.

Bishop Harald Rückert then led the conference in prayers asking for guidance and openness and God's will for the people we are called to lead in this very delicate situation.

- 4. Motion from the Northern Europe and Eurasia Central Conference Council (doc.4)

The motion: **The Northern Europe and Eurasia Central Conference decide to temporarily, until the next ordinary Central Conference, change the borders of the episcopal areas in the Central Conference so that the Ukraine and Moldova Provisional Annual Conference be moved to the Nordic and Baltic episcopal area.**

Bishop Streiff then took over as the presiding officer for this agenda item. The Conference Secretary read the motion to be considered whilst Bishop Streiff read the motion from the Central Conference delegates from East Russia and Central Asia, North-West Russia and Belarus, Central Russia, South Russia Annual Conferences along with four Eurasia members of the Northern Europe and Eurasia Central Conference Council Members and Eurasia Area Bishop Khegay. The full text of this motion and the list of signatories is attached to these minutes.

Two members of the Council, Hilde-Marie Øgreid Movafagh and Robert Tserenkov were asked to speak on behalf of the motion. Hilde-Marie Øgreid Movafagh noted that although apparently straightforward the decision to be made is strongly influenced by political and cultural differences. She had been present at the board meeting in Tallinn and stressed that the proposal in the motion is of a temporary nature until there is again the opportunity for a regular central conference. It is important that the Ukrainian and Moldova Provisional Annual Conference is free to choose its own future. She also stressed the need to listen now at this meeting to the voices of the Ukraine and Moldova Provisional Annual Conference who had not been represented at the Central Conference Council meeting since their member was a refugee, fleeing with her 2 children. She was very clear that the motion was non-political, not an East-West conflict, and was not an attempt to expand the Nordic and Baltic Episcopal Area. The only motivation is the real need to help the Ukraine in its time of present need and to recognise that despite the conciliatory work of the brave Eurasian Bishop Khegay it is impossible politically to have a Russian leadership of a church in Ukraine today. There is currently no solution to the annexation of the Crimea and with an escalating war we must face reality. It will take a long time before there is peace whereby Russians can travel freely in the Ukraine. Ukraine needs global connection within the church that has been without episcopal care for the last 2 years. The natural solution is to move the Ukrainian church to the Nordic and Baltic Area right now, whilst looking forward to reconciliation and peace in the future.

Robert Tserenkov expressed his agreement with the words of Hilde-Marie Øgreid Movafagh. He also noted that the Ukraine and Moldova Provisional Annual Conference had already voted in 2020 to seek transfer to the Nordic and Baltic Episcopal Area. The current situation calls for an immediate implementation of this motion since there is currently no other viable solution. He also stressed that there is no hidden agenda behind the motion being considered today.

Bishop Streiff then opened for the Ukrainian members to come with their comments.

Oleg Starodubets spoke first with his wife Yulia translating. He started by noting that 2 years ago the Ukraine and Moldova Provisional Annual Conference had voted unanimously to leave the Eurasian Conference and join the European Conference. This has not been an easy time for the members who did not have any spiritual support and no official annual conference. Last year they had asked for an official

annual conference, but the previous bishop had not given them a date for this. Since February 24, 2022 the situation has worsened. On the day of this meeting, 66 days later, their people are dying, buildings are being destroyed and there are millions of refugees spread across the world. The Russian Federation is attacking and killing the Ukrainian people and it is probably difficult for those present in this meeting to understand the feelings Ukrainians have for the Russian people. If any new person comes to a UMC church and knows that the bishop is in Moscow the church will be accused as agents supporting the occupants and working for the enemies of their country. This makes it impossible to be a part of the Eurasian Conference. The Ukrainian President came one month ago with a declaration concerning the jurisdictional responsibility for any official communication with Russia. This was primarily directed towards the Russian Orthodox Church, but it is also understood that this also relates to any protestant churches. The war effectively prevents any chance of repairing relationships at this time. They wanted to inform this meeting that so far, since the outbreak of war, neither they themselves, or any other of the Ukrainian UMC pastors or leaders have received any letter or call of support from the Eurasian bishop Khegay or the Eurasia leaders. On the other hand, they have received thousands of letters and calls of support from all over the world. As members of the UMC they need spiritual care and guidance and in to be connection in fellowship and conferences with other brothers and sisters in the UMC. They thanked the Nordic and Baltic Episcopal Area for initiating the process to care for and protect them. The Ukrainian brothers and sisters and their leaders have recently met together to discuss the topic on the table at this Central Conference and supported this motion. They ended by asking that other Ukrainians present could express their views.

Alexandre Arnaut thanked for the opportunity to be at the conference and was deeply grateful, also as a refugee himself, for all the help received from Europe. He noted that the problem started already in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbass. He has friends who have already been refugees from Donbas the last 8 years and people cannot understand how the UMC people can be under a bishop in Russia. The Ukrainian pastors and members decided they could no longer be under Russia, and they wanted to be free to choose where they want to go to (episcopal connection). It might not sound very Christian, but it is impossible to explain to our families and friends fighting in this war defending their homes and families that we have a relationship to Russia. They are so grateful to the Central Conference that they have been given an opportunity to be free.

The final Ukrainian member Alina Hrab was then given the chance to speak. She was also thankful for the decision to help Ukraine by the current motion. She said that the Ukrainian UMC can no longer be in relation with Russia since they are to serve the Ukrainian nation. Right now, there is war with Russia who is the enemy, and they cannot serve the Ukrainian people when the bishop is in Russia. It is morally inappropriate with a Russian bishop. The Ukrainian UMC is working with a lot of refugees, and it is not possible to explain to them this situation. Alina also talked about the situation in her own family where communication with relatives is extremely difficult. She has only just heard that her aunt in Mariupol is "alive" after 2

months of silence. She also has relatives fighting in the Ukrainian army and cannot be fully respectful to them if her church has connections to Russia. She looks forward to the UMC Ukraine being more effective in serving.

The motion was then opened for comments from others present. Helene Benedikte Granum Aanestad then, on behalf of the Norwegian delegates, presented an amendment to be added to the main motion.

Amendment to be added to the main motion:

In accordance with Paragraph 543.5 in the Book of Discipline, this motion has been presented for both bishops.

In its decision, the Central Conference chooses to place decisive emphasis on the wishes of the annual conference in question.

Helene Benedikte Granum Aanestad explained that this addition was to underline that in accordance with the Book of Discipline para 543.5 the original motion as been presented to both bishops in this Central Conference and that the Central Conference chooses to place decisive emphasis on the wishes of the annual conference in question.

Jørgen Thaarup proposed, as a friendly amendment to the amendment that the second sentence "In its decision, the Central Conference chooses to place decisive emphasis on the wishes of the annual conference in question" should be a separate motion. This was accepted by Helene Benedikte Granum Aanestad and this was accepted by the presiding officer Bishop Streiff.

Per-Endre Bjørnevik supported the amendment as it clarifies the background for the main motion in any future decisions. Ināra Avotina raised concerns about what this would mean for the members' countries relationship with Russia.

During the voting only the presiding bishops and the voting members remained in the digital room.

Vote on the following amendment to the main motion:

In accordance with Paragraph 543.5 in the Book of Discipline, this motion has been presented for both bishops.

Result: 48 votes were cast: 42 yes, 1 no and 5 abstentions. The motion was approved.

The non-voting members returned to the room again.

Main motion as amended

Ole Birch, the Conference Secretary, added that if approved, the Central Conference Councils understanding is that since no time has been set in the text of the motion this decision comes into effect immediately.

No motion was proposed to oppose this statement.

Jørgen Thaarup then spoke for the motion and the amendment motion stating that if we are also discussing the Russian letter that he cannot follow the argumentation of the Russian delegates and the fears that they have and that since it may take decades for the war to end the arguments do not count. Sarah Tiainen also spoke for the amended motion pointing out that in the minutes from the 2020 meeting with the Ukraine and Moldova Provisional Annual Conference Bishop Khegay although not in agreement with their request would not contradict their decision i.e., he has already given his support. In reply to Inara, Hilde-Marie Øgreid Movafagh pointed out that most member countries had a border with Russia, but that the decision in UMC here, was subordinate to the issues in the main political landscape and that this did not represent a great danger.

The non-voting members then left the room again.

Vote on the main motion as amended

The Northern Europe and Eurasia Central Conference decide to temporarily, until the next ordinary central conference, change the borders of the episcopal areas in the central conference so that the Ukraine and Moldova Provisional Annual Conference be moved to the Nordic and Baltic episcopal area.

In accordance with Paragraph 543.5 in the Book of Discipline, this motion has been presented for both bishops.

Result: 48 voted yes, 0 no, 1 abstention – the amended motion was approved.

The non-voting members returned to the room again.

Vote on the part of the amendment that was made a separate motion:

In its decision, the Central Conference chooses to place decisive emphasis on the wishes of the annual conference in question.

The non-voting members then left the room again.

Result: 47 voted in favour, 1 against, 0 abstentions. The motion was approved.

The non-voting members returned to the room again.

Bishop Streiff thanked all participants for their thoughtful participation. Bishop Växby then prayed for the decision and for Bishop Christian Alsted with the new responsibilities that this involves.

5. Other matters of information

Bishop Alsted took over as presiding officer and remarked on the admirable work of the church in the Ukraine and the power of connection in the UMC worldwide, also with respect to Russia. Small though they are in number the UMC members in the Nordic and Baltic areas has been quite amazing in their support for the Ukraine. He asked for continued prayer and support for Ukraine, those who have fled the country, for himself, Bishop Khegay and the Eurasian Conferences. We are together as United Methodists and best of all is that God is with us.

Per-Endre Bjørnevik as the Chair of the Committee on Episcopacy welcomed the new members of the Nordic and Baltic Episcopal Area and looked forward to working closely with them.

Bishop Rückert thanked for the opportunity to be present. He greeted all members in the Central Conference area and asked all to remember those suffering in Ukraine. He was also thankful for the fellowship of all the bishops including Bishop Khegay. Bishop Alsted also thanked Lasse Svendsen for his presence at the meeting.

Bishop Alsted asked the members of the Central Conference to keep the dates 15-19th March 2023 free for a possible extra session, either digital or face-to-face, to discuss adaptations to the Book of Discipline and to review the episcopal supervision of Ukraine.

6. Closing Prayer

Ingull Grefslie, Remigijus Matulaitis, Ole Birch and Robert Tserenkov led the conference in prayer.

7. Adjournment

Bishop Alsted thanked Bishop Streiff for presiding during the consideration of the motion, and the officers Ole Birch, Kirsten Hastrup and Charles Jourdan. Bishop Alsted closed by the saying of the Blessing.

Signed: Ole Birch, Secretary
Copenhagen Denmark

Signed: Charles Jourdan, Assistant Secretary
Sandnes, Norway