

Personal report of bishop Christian Alsted to the 2022 annual conferences

Writing this report, I come think about the apostle Paul's words to the church in Philippi:

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. Phil 1:3-6

I am deeply grateful for the ministry of our pastors, deacons and leaders on local and on annual conference level – I am seeing a church rooted and grounded in Christ focused on his mission. You are serving with boldness, flexibility and commitment, while you have had to adapt to one new and challenging situation after the other – thank you!

We are still in a time of reorientation and re-focus in a new reality as we are coming out of the pandemic. Some churches have come out stronger than before, while most churches have less people, and those who are still anxious or have developed other habits are only slowly returning to their Christian community.

War in Ukraine

The war in Ukraine and the high number of refugees coming to our countries is an opportunity to interpret the gospel in tangible ways and to engage in ministries of hospitality, pastoral care and counseling either in our churches or in collaboration with ecumenical partners. Our churches should be made available to refugees, who want to celebrate orthodox worship; and we should respectfully offer a spiritual home to those looking for Christian fellowship, while they are here. We have the opportunity to offer hope to the refugees and to our fellow citizens – and many of our local churches and clergy are engaging in this important work.

In times of war, truth is often suppressed and distorted, the church has an obligation to speak truth in love and to name good and evil, even if truth is against the side, we are identifying with. If we are silent now, we have no right to speak about peace and reconciliation once the fighting has ended.

Our central conference consists of Eurasian, Nordic and Baltic countries, including Russia and Ukraine. The Christian Church is not nationalistic and our relations with our brothers and sisters in other countries are not limited by nationality or culture. We have deep relations with each other, and although we are influenced by our culture and the political realities, we must never allow this to hinder or break our unity in Christ.

This being said, we stand with the United Methodists in Ukraine in prayer for protection, reconciliation and peace. We pray for pastors, leaders and congregations in Ukraine; may God grant that their witness of reconciliation and peace will bring strength and hope to the Ukrainian people.

Stay focused on the Mission

Over the last few years we have been reminded that life is unpredictable, and circumstances may change rapidly, dramatically, and beyond our influence.

We have been reminded of the importance of being firmly rooted and grounded in the faith and identity in Christ. While much inside and outside of the church is up in the air, the mission of “making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world” remains clear and our resolve to be part of His mission should be unwavering.

I firmly believe the people of this world need Christ, and our calling is, as Wesley said, “to offer them Christ”. We know, what hope is, and we know what it means to reach out for something to hold on to, when we are caught up in grief, despair and fear. At times we need to be hoping for those, who have lost any sense of hope.

We are called to pray and to speak and embody faith, hope and love.

To do this we must continue to focus on creating and building new faith communities and fresh expressions of church.

To do this we must continue to focus on developing principled and Spirit filled Christian leaders.

To do this we must purposefully focus on making the church younger and more engaging to youth

The United Methodist Church

With yet another postponement of General Conference to 2024, the tension and impatience in the churches in the United States and Europe over issues related to human sexuality is growing to a point of destabilization. The announced launching of a new traditional denomination named the Global Methodist Church by the first of May 2022 has contributed further to this. More perspectives on this are offered in the report from the central conference council to the 2022 annual conferences.

For the Nordic and Baltic episcopal area, I wish to emphasize the following.

We should be careful not to be shaped by the deeply polarizing writings by differing organizations and caucus groups in our church in the United States, they are often times unnuanced and stuffed with accusations, false assumptions and theological generalizations.

In Northern Europe we may hold diverse positions on human sexuality, as we hold diverse positions on a number of other issues, however, this should not make us jump to assumptions about each other's sincerity of faith, appreciation and respect of the Word of God, or of our perception of God's grace and love.

We may experience disaffiliation in the Nordic and Baltic area, as some local churches, clergy and even districts or annual conferences may decide to depart from the United Methodist Church to unite with another denomination. Nevertheless, we are still Christian brothers and sisters, we are still fellow Methodists, and our witness to the world around and to future generations will be determined by the love and respect for each other, we will be able to show in process and afterwards.

My Position and Commitments

As bishop I have chosen to take the middle ground trying to be a bridgebuilder between diverse positions and understandings, while I continue to be deeply committed to the United Methodist Church.

Christ's prayer for our unity and command to gather all at His table, to make space for one another, appreciate one another, and look for Christ in each other, prohibits us from creating individual tables only for those who think, act, look, and perceive the world like we do. We cannot be a church that fractures its identity and commitment to Christ by claiming to be a traditional church or a progressive church or a centrist

church. We cannot be a gay or straight church. Our churches must be more than echo chambers made in our own image arguing with each other while neglecting God's mission. This is the way of the world.

Instead, we must be one people, rooted in scripture, centered in Christ, serving in love and united in the essentials. This is part of the ministry of reconciliation that Christ gave to each of us. Our best witness is to love each other as Christ loves us, to show the world the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit to bind us together despite our differences. This is living out the gospel; confident in what God has done in Jesus Christ for all humankind, and committed to personal and social salvation and transformation

I believe all our members, clergy, local churches, and annual conferences can continue to have a home in the United Methodist Church, whether they consider themselves liberal, evangelical, progressive, traditionalist, middle of the road, conservative, centrist, or something else.

Nevertheless, I respect those who may choose to disaffiliate, and I am committed to help each of our clergy, local church and conferences to move into a situation, where they engage in Christ's mission and live with integrity. This implies that within the bounds of the discipline, I will do my utmost to ensure the necessary processes are as smooth and easy as possible.

Part of my commitment is to meet with of the local churches and each of the clergy that wish disaffiliate before they make their decision, this is to give the opportunity to answer any questions they might have to the bishop, as well as to ensure that they are a well informed of the process and the implications of disaffiliation.

In the midst of the complexities of life and church, I remain "confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ."

Christian Alsted