

Receive  
the Holy Spirit...



## The Episcopal Address & the Laity Address

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# *Episcopal Address*

I enjoy sitting at the beach watching the ocean - the fresh smell of the salty sea air in my nostrils, the sharp cries of the seagulls, and the waves rolling in towards the shore. The waves have a heartbeat of their own, they steepen and break unto the beach and the water recedes, steepen and break - recede, steepen and break - recede, steepen and break - recede. It goes on and on and on and on and on and on,,,,

When I sit there watching the ocean, I lower my shoulders, I calm down, relax, and slowly I fall into the rhythm, the same rhythm again and again. Like my breath, breathing out, breathing in, exhale, inhale

Jesus sending his disciples “as the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Jesus breathing on His disciples, “receive the Holy Spirit” – The same rhythm, exhale, inhale, exhale inhale....

This is how the Spirit moves, we are filled and then we are sent. We are never filled for our own pleasure or our own edification; we are filled for a higher purpose, we are filled to be sent with and in the power of the Spirit, to be witnesses, to make disciples baptizing and teaching, to follow God in His mission. And for this sending, we need the energy of the Spirit, the truth of the Spirit, the freedom of the Spirit, the memory of the Spirit, the direction of the Spirit.

Without the Holy Spirit we would still be sitting there, anxiously worrying about what might happen to us, wondering if what He said and did was true or just a giant illusion.



## Grace and the Holy Spirit

In the Letter to a Roman Catholic, John Wesley writes:

“I believe the infinite and eternal Spirit of God, equal with the Father and the Son, to be not only perfectly holy in himself, but the direct cause of all holiness in us; enlightening our understandings, correcting our wills and affections, renewing our natures, uniting our persons to Christ, assuring us of our adoption as sons, leading us in our actions; purifying and sanctifying our souls and bodies, to a full and eternal enjoyment of God.”<sup>1</sup>

John Wesley’s understanding of the Holy Spirit is clearly trinitarian. The Holy Spirit is infinite and eternal and equal with the Father and the Son, they are interrelated.

In his book responsible grace Randy Maddox explains that Wesley understood the Holy Spirit to be God’s gracious empowering presence restored through Christ. He says, “in one instance Wesley even defines grace simply as the power of the Holy Spirit enabling us to believe and love and serve God, which corresponds with the letter to the Roman Catholic”, where Wesley says, “the Holy Spirit is the direct cause of all holiness in us enlightening our understandings, correcting our wills and affections, and renewing our natures uniting our persons to Christ and assuring us of our adoption as sons.”<sup>2</sup>

While Wesley prefers using the term “grace”, which he unfolds in a comprehensive theology of grace from prevenient grace to justifying grace to sanctifying grace to glorifying grace, he could have used “grace” and “the Holy Spirit” interchangeably. Not least when, he describes prevenient grace and sanctifying grace. Prevenient grace/the Holy Spirit is at work giving people the divine impulse to do good, to love, to realize their short comings and to seek God. Sanctifying grace/the Holy Spirit is the “direct cause of all holiness in us; enlightening our understandings, correcting our wills and affections, renewing our natures, uniting our persons to Christ.”

The Holy Spirit enable us to will and to want and to desire to be filled, shaped, motivated and driven in the love of Christ towards his likeness.

Jesus breathed on his disciples and said: receive the Holy Spirit.<sup>3</sup> He propelled them into God’s mission emphasizing that the breath of God, the Spirit, inspires every good desire in the heart of the believer, who exhales back to God love, wonder, praise, prayer and obedience.



## The Lifegiver

As Jesus had taught in his final teachings to his disciples in John 14 through 16, the Holy Spirit communicates true knowledge of God and of his saving work in the world and in us. Through our physical senses we receive information from the world around us, in the same way the Holy Spirit reminds us of who we are, and of God's truth, and conveys lifegiving power and direction to take part in God's mission.

The work of the Holy Spirit is in the life of the believer, in the community and in the church. The former leader in the Methodist Church in Britain poignantly describes this in his book "the Way to Pentecost" from 1932:

"The presence of the Spirit is vital and central to the work of the Church. Nothing else avails. Apart from the Spirit, wisdom becomes folly, and strength weakness. ... Scholarship is blind to spiritual truth till He reveals. Worship is idolatry till He inspires. Preaching is powerless if it be not a demonstration of the Spirit's power. Prayer is vain unless He energizes, human resources of learning and organization, wealth and enthusiasm, reform, and philanthropy, are worse than useless if there be no Holy Ghost in them"<sup>4</sup>

Without the Spirit there would be no us, the good news would never have reached our shores, our hills, our plains and our mountains.

It's nice to relax at the seashore, but we are not meant to stay there, we are called, sent and equipped to get up and face the realities of life and to move forward equipped with the Spirit.

## Worried

I admit, life in 2025 may seem overwhelming. The list of problems threatening our existence is long: War, rearmament, right wing nationalism, racism, climate change, world population growth, hunger and poverty, just to mention a few.

In the most recent survey Finland comes out as the happiest country in the world with Denmark in the second place<sup>5</sup>, and yet youth are struggling with anxiety, isolation, confusion, and feeling of being out of place. For decades, our cultures have been abandoning Christianity, and the influence of Christian values is rapidly fading.

I understand, why many are concerned even worried about the future.



Is there any hope? Not perfunctory optimism, but a powerful force equipping us to face life with courage, creativity and confidence?

I hear the words of the risen Jesus: “Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you” And I sense his breath: “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

## A Shaken Relationship

There is war going on between countries in our central conference, Russia has brutally invaded Ukraine, and the war has shaken our relationships.

Four Eurasia annual conferences are leaving the United Methodist Church at the beginning of this central conference. The reason is disagreements with the denomination’s way of handling our diverse understandings of homosexuality. Having been in close relationship with each other in the central conference for more than 30 years, the separation, painful as it is, was intended to be friendly and respectful, now the war has come between us and made our relationship difficult.

## Jesus Challenges Us

From kindergarten and school, over social media and to world politics, we are all familiar with the idea ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’. Revenge, believing that retaliation is a viable path forward.

If someone kicks you, you kick them back. If a country bombs you, you bomb them back. If a religion kills your people, you kill them back. If someone takes your eye, you take theirs...

Jesus challenges this ancient dynamic –retaliation should not be your default response. Restoring justice through revenge is not going to get us anywhere. And he goes on: Don’t hit back at all, if someone strikes you, stand there and take it. Make use of all hurt, injustice and violence as an opportunity to try to act as one of my followers. Try to be merciful and live generously.

Jesus’ approach comes out as naïve to people living amid war in Ukraine -suffering daily attacks, burying their sons and daughters and trying to keep their hopes up after more than three years of war. I understand those who say, “I can’t deal with those biblical texts right now, they make no sense to me. I know Jesus speaks the truth, but I just can’t believe it.”<sup>6</sup>



## Rearmament

Life doesn't work that way, and most certainly, life doesn't work that way on a geopolitical level. The only response we know in the face of violence is more violence. The only response we can come up with in the face of war it's more weapons, more killing and more destruction – and in the coming years our countries will spend billions of Euro buying weapons and ammunition. We will send support to Ukraine, and we will build our own military to discourage the enemy from attacking and to be able to defend our countries in a potential war.

There are evil intended leaders in this world, who cannot be trusted, and I don't possess the knowledge or wisdom to protest the rearmament, which seems inevitable. Nevertheless, the enormous amounts of money invested in rearmament, as necessary as it may be, could have been used to reduce poverty and hunger, to invest in education and healthcare, building schools and hospitals, reducing our use of fossil fuels and so much more to the benefit of humanity. And we will all have to answer for our priorities, our actions and inaction.

## Be Prepared

Dear church, today we seem closer to being at war in Europe, than we have been since World War II. Right now war is going on in Ukraine and hundreds are being killed and injured on a daily basis - we may experience the same in our countries in the next few years. Our governments are taking the situation very seriously and are asking the population to be prepared.

Our Ukrainian brothers and sisters have much knowledge and hard earned experience, they can share with the rest of the central conference, and we need to listen and learn.

In the church we need to be prepared, if the war expands beyond Ukraine, and if our countries send soldiers to serve in Ukraine, we must:

- train military chaplains.
- train pastors, deacons and health personnel to work with traumatized people.
- think and talk through, how we can best serve people in a time of crisis and war.
- ask, what should we preach and teach now and if the war comes?

And right now, we need to preach and teach about hope, and what it means to live with hope.



## Is There Another way?

Is there another way? And, I know that the answer is not, let's open the doors, let's welcome our enemies and hand over everything to them.

My question is, what is a genuinely Christian response?

Seven months after the full-scale invasion, at the General Assembly of the world Council of Churches, I heard Metropolitan Job of Psidia say: "While we are gathered in the comfort of this place, two Christian nations in Europe are at war - Christians are killing Christians. How is this reflecting Christian discipleship. how can we Christians be silent, while this is happening?"

Again, Jesus challenges us way beyond our comfort zone saying: You know the law says love your friends, which is often accompanied by the unwritten law, hate your enemy. But I'm telling you and I know this is challenging, love your enemies. let your enemies bring out the best in you, and not your worst. When someone is giving you a hard time, respond with fervent prayer - then You are acting as a true child of God. You see, this is what God does he gives his best to all of us, his sun rises on all of us and his rain waters the ground for all of us. And this happens regardless of how good or bad, nice or nasty we are. If you only love those who love you, don't expect a special bonus. You're simply doing what everybody else does. If you only say hello to those who greet you, no one will notice. That is exactly what everybody else is doing too. Pull yourselves together, You are God's children, you were created for more than this. Live and love generously and graciously. Live and love the way God lives and loves towards you. Be perfect like God is perfect.<sup>7</sup>

Jesus knows that we will come short - these standards are so far from where we are - nevertheless, he's not lowering the bar, he is raising it. This is how God is. This is how God is responding to you. This is how he loves you. This is the way of his mercy to you. This is his grace.

Growing up and pulling ourselves together it's not going to suffice. He is challenging us to be transformed in our innermost being by the grace and mercy of God - this is the only way to a life reflecting God's love. We cannot earn it. We don't deserve it - it is his gift to us, and all we can do is to receive it, to take it in, to be consumed by it and let it fill all the dark corners of our lives.





## Reconciliation?

Now is not the time to reconcile – as long as drones and missiles are still fired, as long as people are killed - loving your enemy is far away. The Ukrainians know this, we all know this - love and reconciliation is not close at hand.

We are all affected by the violence, the killing, the hard words and the lies – watching the news affects us, hearing certain politicians speak affects us, reading the stories of suffering in Ukraine, in Gaza or somewhere else affects us. We may be tempted to turn of the news, simply because it's too much. Nonetheless, we have to be aware, and we cannot shut our eyes. But. We must protect our souls, conscious that this evil may affect our souls, fill us with hatred and make us cynical.

Can we help each other, can we pray for the Holy Spirit to show us a different way? Could we exercise our love muscles and practice reconciliation at least in our families, in our friendships and in our local churches? Can we have a loving and reconciling attitude towards each other, and do our best to be gentle with one another and not suspect wrong motives?

The Baptist pastor and civil rights leader in the United States Dr Martin Luther King, taught people in the civil rights movement to protest and act without violence. They did their utmost to not respond to violence with violence – they worked hard to get away from the human default of retaliation.

King said: “Love is the greatest force in the universe. It is the heartbeat of the moral cosmos. He who loves is a participant in the being of God.”<sup>8</sup>

## What is Christianity?

This year we celebrate a church gathering, which took place in the year 325 AD. 1700 years ago bishops from all corners of the known world were summoned by the Roman emperor Constantine in the city of Nicaea, in today's Turkey. This was the first of several ecumenical councils in the history of the Christian church, and the main purpose was to achieve a common understanding of who Jesus Christ is, and how he is related with the Father.

A controversy had emerged around Arius of Alexandria and his followers, who claimed Christ is only similar and subordinate to the Father. While the vast majority of the church spearheaded



by Athanasius the future patriarch of Alexandria believed Christ is of the same nature and substance as God the Father and thus eternal like the Father.

The emperor believed the division was merely an academic disagreement between two groups of religious experts, and that the matter could be easily resolved – he was mistaken. They met from May until the end of July in 325 for vital conversations about the beliefs, the teachings, the rituals, and the order of the church. When the council ended, they had described the divine nature of Jesus Christ the son of God, and His relationship with the Father, expressed through a creed, which defines the Godhead, Father and Son, their nature and interrelatedness, while it only mentions the Holy Spirit. The creed was a significant and necessary initial expression of the faith, however, it wasn't completed until the council in 381 AD in Constantinople. The Nicene-Constantinople creed of 381 AD, today known as the "Nicene Creed", laid out the church's unified doctrine of the three persons in the one Trinity, affirming their interrelatedness, their co-equality and co-eternity.

The creed of 325 AD established the first boundaries saying, those who do not believe this are not part of the true church and are to be considered heretics.

Furthermore, the Nicaea council decided on one date for the celebration of Easter in the entire church, and on a few practical matters that had caused disagreement.

Constantine's purpose of interfering with the church's internal business presumably was to secure unity and stability, the outcome was even more far-reaching, as the Nicaea council established the relationship between state and church and laid the foundation of Christian orthodoxy<sup>9</sup> and of the unity of the church for centuries to come.

## Truth

The Nicaea council endeavored to establish the universal and eternal truth of the Christian faith, the outcome was a creed accepted throughout the church.

In our time, the existence of objective, ultimate and universal truth is widely questioned. Many believe truth is subjective, individualistic and relativistic, meaning truth is different from person to person

Humanistic and social science taught at most of our higher educational institutions emphasize social -constructivism as the preferred philosophy of science approach saying, truth emerges as a product of social processes and the interactions an individual or group is engaging in.



Others would say, truth is normative, meaning truth is what we decide to be true. Or to put it in a different way: It's always the others who don't see reality as it is.

We hear world leaders blatantly repeat one series of lies after another, shamelessly claiming that obvious lies are truth with an insistence that affects reality and makes the lie a new truth to more and more people. There is a name for this "gaslighting".

AI manipulated messages, photos and videos make us ask; how do we distinguish between fact and opinion? How do we determine who delivers the message and from where? How do we determine whether the person on the photo or in the video even exists?

The question of truth and our perception of truth will be an extremely important topic in the coming years.

It is said that truth is the first casualty of war. I think the same is true in deep conflicts and crises - the truth is often sacrificed. That's why it's so important to insist on speaking the truth. We have a Christian obligation to tell the truth about what's going on - and we have that obligation even when the truth is against the party or group we are inclined to sympathize with. Neither individual Christians nor churches should identify so much with any of the parties in a conflict that it undermines their sound judgement and their commitment to truth and justice. Even when the truth is against us or when it is inconvenient, we must side with truth.

## A Snapshot of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christianity

At the time of the Nicaea council the centers of Christianity were Constantinople, Alexandria and Rome, today only Rome has retained its position.

In the year 1900, 80% of all Christians in the world lived in Europe and in North America, in the near future 80% of all Christians will live in Africa Asia, Latin America and Oceania. Christianity has always been moving and changing.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century the Pentecostal and the charismatic movement is the fastest growing part of Christianity. Today 1.7 billion Christians live in the global South and make up 67% of all Christians in the world, this number is expected to increase to 2.6 billion in 2050 which is 77% of the world's Christian population.

What is Christianity today? For certain it is not what Christianity was in 1950 or in 1980, when Christianity was largely defined from the northern hemisphere.



When the great 1910 missionary conference gathered in Edinburgh, less than 2% of the 1579 delegates came from the global south. The delegates were driven by the vision “The Evangelization of the World in This Generation”, but today no one is looking to the global North for the future of Christianity.

The churches in the North may be wealthy, but they also strive with indifference, secularization, lack of knowledge, prejudice and decline. While the churches in the global South struggle with the challenges of growth and developing the depth of the faith through discipleship to impact and shape the society.

## Survival Mode is Off

Christians in Afghanistan say, we will worship, and we may get killed. Christians in our part of the world say we will worship unless, we are on vacation, or away on the weekend, or were at a late party Saturday night, or simply not in the mood. Worship has become an appendix to our busy existence, a spice we add to our lives when we feel like it, and we suffer from it, our churches suffer from it, and our communities suffer from it.

Healthy living, eating healthy nutritious food, getting your exercise, staying in shape is a good thing, which we all need. However, our culture has become obsessed with our bodily health, while the health of our souls is completely neglected. The souls of 21st century Europeans are in a very poor condition. Should we just accept this as a new normal - I don't think so.

While the church in Europe in general is in a crisis, the question on the top of our mind should not be the survival of the church.

We tend to forget the gap between the biblical vision of the church and the assumptions we breathe in from the society around us, deceiving us to think the church is just like any other good cause NGO that needs to be supported.

“The Church is in God's keeping. We do not have the right to be anxious about it. We have our Lord's words that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it,”<sup>10</sup> said missiologist Leslie Newbigin. And what a relief it is; the survival of the church does not depend on us, and we don't even have the right to be anxious about it.

Our job is to live and embody the gospel, we are bearers of the Gospel, which is a vital part of being involved in God's mission (the Missio Dei). Gospel-bearing is concerned with making dis-



ciples of Jesus Christ, it is inescapably contextual and involves the entire church. Through the practices of compassion, justice and gospel-bearing we partner with God in the realization of his reign in the world.

## Signs of a New Day

The pendulum has been swinging towards indifference and secularization for several decades, now it appears to be moving more in the direction of curiosity and spiritual openness. Newspapers in the Nordic countries have reported a growing interest in religion among young people - many express a desire to believe in some kind of higher power.

While any interest in religion and spirituality was an absolutely no-go for most politicians and celebrities a decade or two ago, we see many politicians, actors and even stand-up comedians expressing their faith. Most are still remarkably modest and careful “not to go too far” in claiming to be Christians, nevertheless they speak quite openly about their faith in ways and with words refreshingly unreligious.

Is this a trend, or rather a “return to normal”, as Joel Halldorf says in a comment in the Swedish newspaper *Expressen*, “atheism creates an emptiness which it cannot fill, therefore the return of religion is inevitable.”<sup>11</sup>

## A Historic Opportunity

Nonetheless, several trend-experts, sociologists and researchers in their analysis of trends among different groups are observing a steadily growing tendency among youth, not least among young men, towards wanting to talk about faith. Several pastors have noticed young people are beginning to attend worship.

Simultaneously, many teachers and psychologists are reporting an increasing level of unhappiness and mental imbalance among 16-25 year-olds caused by increased competition and performance pressure in the education system and other life arenas such as social media. Many youth are expressing significant concern and little hope for future – the effects of climate change, the war in Ukraine and the overall security situation appear to be main contributors to this concern.



In an article in the Christian daily in Denmark, Jacob Holst Mouritzen challenges the churches saying:

“Churches have a historic opportunity to gain the attention and interest of younger generations. But it requires action, a clear strategy and targeted communication. If Christianity wants to be taken seriously as an answer to young people’s existential questions, communication must be moved to the channels where young people actually are.

Alternatively, there are already many others knocking at the door to provide the answers they are looking for. And I fear that the church and the Christian faith are far from being first in the mental search engine when seeking spiritual answers.

The church must understand that it is in a competition of minds, morals, values and beliefs. The Church is not only competing with other faiths, but also with influencers, spiritual communities and online subcultures that offer clear, distinct messages of meaning and identity.”<sup>12</sup>

We need to become purposeful about reaching out to young people, not only in our youth ministry but in what we are doing in all our ministries, not least online. We need to train young missional leaders to champion these efforts, we need to work in collaboration with other churches, and we need to move fast. Mouritzen’s point is well taken, the openness is towards faith, spirituality and existential questions, not specifically towards Christianity - we are just one out of several options, and we are in a highly competitive field.

The attraction is more towards authenticity and ability to communicate faith and hope in genuine and relevant ways, than towards being smart, cool and trendy.

## We are off the Map

The way we live, work, learn, communicate, and obtain information changes rapidly. Change has never been as fast as it is today and will never be as slow as it is today. Our reality is increasingly fragmented and pluralistic, we are far from the homogeneous world we knew 20, 30, 40 or 50 years ago.

I was amazed by the creativity, flexibility and ingenuity we saw during the global pandemic, pastors and leaders courageously stepped up and made rapid shifts, moved ministry online, cared for people in creative ways, and explored new avenues to connect with the community. Despite promising each other, we would hold on to all the new learnings and approaches to ministry, almost all of us defaulted back into old familiar patterns, once the pandemic was finally over.



But, now we all know, we can find new ways. We all know the courage is there...

We used to know and at least to some extent understand our reality, we knew how to navigate, and we had the proper vehicles to move us forward like: Worship services, youth groups, Sunday schools, seminars, evangelistic campaigns, theological seminaries, hymns and organs, ordained pastors and deacons, small groups and more.

New structures, better and more inviting facilities, and more relevant and attractive worship services and programs will not bring us into the future. They are the well-used solutions that have brought us this far, but they are not likely to be able to take us where we need to go.

Even before the pandemic, and certainly afterwards we are off the map. Our GPS is not updated to the new roads, the new one-way streets, the new roundabouts and the new speed limits.

## Discovering the New Map

To begin to see the new map and navigate in the new reality, we will have to find new, perhaps even unlikely partners, who know their way in the new landscape and are willing to help us. Some of these partners, may be found in our churches, especially among new-comers, some we may find among the curios on the margins of the church.

When we look for new vehicles to bring us forward, we may have to redesign and even reinvent familiar means of ministry, we will need to give up several outdated vehicles, and we will undoubtedly need to discover new ones. I firmly believe we must explore and discover another model of church - a high impact low-cost model - and it may not involve the kind of buildings we are accustomed to or the number of employed clergy and staff we currently have. The question is, are we willing to listen and to learn?

As we engage in this bold experimenting endeavor, we need to remind ourselves, that church is basically three interconnected relationships: Our relationship with the Triune God – Our relationship with each other in community – And our relationship with the people and the world around us. (And I know most of you have heard me say this before)

While Jesus Christ and our faith in Him certainly is the foundation of the church, this foundation always leads to community, as the Christian life in essence is communal. Furthermore, our faith in Jesus Christ and our life in community, cannot exist in isolation, in a vacuum - for the faith truly to come alive, we must share and embody it.



Our relationship with God is nourished through worship and the spiritual disciplines, our relationship with each other is nourished through small groups, and our relationship with the world around us is played out in our daily lives.

## It is Happening

Some of our churches and ministries are beginning to discover the new map and find ways to navigate it, some examples are...

Engaging with the community in Vergale, an outreach from the church in Tarsi, Latvia. Creating a summer-church as a social-diaconal-cultural experiment for tourists and locals in an abandoned church in Svolvær, Lofoten, Norway. Ministry with a large group of Ukrainian youth in Vasa, Finland. Golgatha, a new faith community initiated by a group of youth, in Frederiksberg, Denmark. The student ministry in Lviv, Ukraine, offering an open Christian student community throughout the week. Oslo Methodist Church, Norway engaging in strong mission partnerships with local churches in Liberia. MSA Friday a community with single parents and their children – food, fun and friendship, run by the Methodist social work in collaboration with the Jerusalem Church in Copenhagen, Denmark. New church start in Virga, Latvia. Several churches are livestreaming their worship services, and they are making new connections with a growing group of people – like the Kaunas UMC in Lithuania. And there are several other good examples.

We need more - more experiments, more failures, more learnings, more experiences – and we need to encourage each other to try, fail and try again.

## We are Moderates

Columnist David Brooks says in an article in the New York Times “the problem with moderates has always been that they don’t have a magnetic idea. Recent moderation has been a bland porridge that defines itself by what it doesn’t like.” He goes on by identifying the core problem in America today: division, the growing gaps between rich and poor, rural and urban, educated and less educated, left and right, black and white.”<sup>13</sup> With a few modifications I believe the same could be said about Europe, we are facing the same division, fragmentation, isolation, protectionism and right wing nationalism.





Moderation really is a way of being, it's an attitude of humility, refraining from always having to be right. When we listen to other people, when we consider other perspectives, when we try to learn and understand, and when we realize as human beings we are bound together, we love our children, we have an affection for our country and the place we live, and we are bound together, as we are all God's beloved children sharing the same humanity. The profound Christian perception of unity, of being bound together through God's love revealed in Jesus Christ, I believe, is the magnetic idea to overcome division.

## We should have done Better

If only the world-wide United Methodist Church had looked to Nicaea and the other early church councils to find insight and inspiration to work on resolving our differences through theological debates, polemics and even reconciliations. Instead, we fell into the trap of superficial bible reading, quick arguments, human rights and tunnel vision. We stopped doing the hard work of studying the Bible together, meaning the whole Bible not just preferred books and passages. We stopped paying attention together to the enlightening of the accumulated experience of the church, our tradition. We didn't watch and listen carefully together to the vivification of the faith found in the experience of Christians. And we didn't use our God given minds, our reason, together to determine how to understand all this. We began to believe, we could organize our way out of our disagreements, and we came up with sophisticated plans, petitions and procedures to help us get to where, one or the other group wanted to go.

We stopped listening to each other, we stopped talking with each other, and we fell into the trap of talking about each other and shouting at each other. We labelled each other liberals, conservatives, traditionalists, progressives almost forcing each other to fit into these very narrow boxes.

Unity was of the table and not considered that important - after all the the Christian church has split many times through history. When anyone suggested prayer, spiritual discernment, Christian conferencing or even conversation – they were laughed out. We had developed pre-conceived perceptions of each other. By default, we expected hidden motives and agendas. We hurt each other deeply.

And at least, all in some kind of leadership position have sins to confess. I know, I do.

Perhaps we didn't know better. But I am not convinced that is a viable excuse.



## Can We become Radical Again?

Several years after the Church of Norway had gone through the turmoil dealing marriage and human sexuality, Per Arne Dahl a profiled bishop in the Church of Norway after his retirement published a book entitled “The Power of Hospitality”. In his book he calls the church back to living and practicing radical Christianity. In an interview with Vårt Land he says, “There is no more room for leaking energy or trying to navigate all the people’s different opinions, it is time to practice.”<sup>14</sup> The Church of Norway has experienced deep conflicts and divisions over these matters, and Dahl encourages the church to reconcile, laying aside the issues of contention and move on focusing on the mission.

I ask the same question, after years of disagreement, discussion, division and even separation, will we be able to live together respectfully, offering generous space for each other to live and serve with integrity? And just as important, will we be able to leave the discussions behind us and become radical again focusing on mission?

“We have access by faith into this grace in which we stand through him, and we boast in the hope of God’s glory.<sup>3</sup> But not only that! We even take pride in our problems, because we know that trouble produces endurance,<sup>4</sup> endurance produces character, and character produces hope.<sup>5</sup> This hope doesn’t put us to shame, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.”<sup>15</sup>

As Wesley would put it, the Holy Spirit, the direct cause of all holiness in us, desires again to enlighten our understandings, correct our wills and affections, and renew our innermost being uniting us with Christ.

There are no short cuts, trouble produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope. Hard work, fervent prayer, creativity, courage and persistence will enable us, Nordic, Baltic and Ukrainian United Methodists, to become serious about our discipleship and to be what we are....



## What are We?

We are a Jesus centered moderate bridge-building church willing to wrestle with the important issues without quick fixes and polarizing solutions.

We are a church focused on God's salvation in Jesus Christ in all its fullness and for all of creation.

We are a church forming disciples of Jesus Christ, who empowered by the Holy Spirit, love boldly, serve joyfully and lead courageously.

My question is: Will we again become a church with a deep resounding and passionate joy and awareness of being sent into God's mission?

The past few years have reminded us of our limited knowledge about the future. We may be entering the beginning of the apocalypse, or we may be entering the beginning of the golden age of Christianity in the Nordic, Baltic and Ukraine area and in Europe– we don't know.

But, one thing I do know! No matter matter what, God's mission is yet alive! And no matter what, our calling remains the same, to make disciples of Jesus Christ, who empowered by the Holy Spirit, love boldly, serve joyfully and lead courageously shaping people and the world in His image.

"Listen to words of the risen Jesus: "Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you" And feel his breath on your face: "Receive the Holy Spirit."

*Prayerfully submitted*

*Christian Alsted*



## Notes

- 1 John Wesley, A Letter to a Roman Catholic, 1755
- 2 Randy Maddox, Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology (Kingswood Series), 1994
- 3 John 20:22, Common English Bible
- 4 Samuel Chadwick, The Way to Pentecost, Light and Hope Publications 1937
- 5 World Population Review Happiest Countries in the World 2025
- 6 Said by several Ukrainians I have been in conversation with.
- 7 Matthew 5:43-48 in my own words
- 8 A handwritten note by dr. Martin Luther King believed to have been written sometime in the mid 1960s.
- 9 Orthodoxy: Adherence to correct or accepted creeds
- 10 Lesslie Newbigin, A Word in Season: Perspectives on Christian World Mission, Eerdmans 1994
- 11 Joel Halldorf, Expressen, 16 dec 2024
- 12 "Livsstilsekspert: Vi rider på en ekstraordinær bølge af åndelig interesse." Kristeligt Dagblad, 18 Mar 2025
- 13 David Brooks, New York Times 25 Feb, 2019
- 14 Per Arne Dahl, interview by Jor Hjulstad Tvedt 08 February, 2022
- 15 Romans 5:2-5, Common English Bible



# *Laity Address*

*Dariia Zhukovska , Ukraine*

Good afternoon, everyone.

My name is Dariia and I serve at St John's UMC in Lviv. Today I am a delegate from the Ukrainian Annual Conference.

## Challenges and Opportunities for the Church in Today's World

I am writing this speech at a rather difficult time for myself and for the country. Before preparing it, I talked to representatives of churches from other Ukrainian cities because I understand that each church has its own conditions, its own people, and even a different level of threat from missile and drone attacks.

Some said that everything is stable, the church works like clockwork, everyone is in their place. However, many spoke about difficulties that are not only local but also common to the entire Ukrainian church. And this is what I want to talk about today.

## War and Its Impact on the Church

We are in the fourth year of the war. At the end of January, within a week and a half, my brother and my boyfriend were taken to the army right off the street. My brother is my last living relative, and my boyfriend is one of the ministers in our church. On 26 January, on Sunday, we were



supposed to play together in worship, but on Saturday morning he was already mobilised, and in the afternoon he was at the training base. With a bouquet of flowers he had. I am grateful to the girls who agreed to stand in for us at the last minute because I was devastated.

As strange as it may sound, our church has long suffered from a lack of young men. Some went to war, some left the country, and some are simply afraid to go out. This leads to the fact that there are fewer ministers, no men's groups, and girls do not have anyone to build families with. Our pastor is really happy when there are guys in the church.

Also in the context of ministry, one girl from Uzhhorod said that their worship team cannot go to the church in Kamianytsia village to serve as a band because of blockposts. The men are forced to stay in the city, and the services are held in the conditions that the realities of wartime allow.

Even pastors who have not been officially registered until 2022 face the threat of being mobilised, despite the new law on clergy reservation.

And this is only a small part of how the war affects the church.

'For I know the plans I have for you,' says the LORD. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.' (Jeremiah 29:11).

## Exhaustion and new Challenges in Ministry

War is exhausting. Sometimes, we no longer have the enthusiasm we had in 2022, when everyone united to help and pray. Comfortable Christianity has emerged, as well as a fear of going beyond the local community, there is less sacrifice and more of a 'I want to do it, I do not want to do it' approach. I think we need to remember to take more care of ourselves, our physical and mental health, and, of course, our hearts.

The Lord reminds us:

'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest' (Matthew 11:28).

'So let's not get tired of doing what is good. At just the right time we will reap a harvest of blessings if we don't give up.' (Galatians 6:9).



## A Test of Values and Biblical Principles

Last year our church also faced a challenge to our values regarding the ideology of marriage. We all know what was decided at the central conference and how it contradicts the biblical principles we profess. I thank God that we, the Ukrainian church, still have the opportunity to hold on to our conservative views. But to be honest I believe that the challenges in this matter are probably still ahead.

## Opportunities that open up in these Dark Times

Despite all the difficulties, we have come to value relationships even more. I have noticed that we focus more on relationships with God and people, build closer ties, and support each other. The war teaches us not to waste time on the useless, but to cherish what has eternal value.

‘Bear one another’s burdens, and so you will fulfil the law of Christ’ (Galatians 6:2).

This is another important lesson we need to learn: the church is not just a building or structure, but a living community that helps, prays and supports.

## The hope and Calling of the Church

Despite everything, God is good. He continues to work, to provide the necessary things, to answer prayers, to protect those who fight on the frontline and for whom we pray. Even in a world where everything seems to be losing its sense, we have no right to lose hope. We are called to continue to believe, pray and work in God’s field.

I have many stories and testimonies of how God works when the whole world is losing its mind. Is it easy now? No. Is it scary? Yes, it is. But we have to remember that we see only a small part of the big picture, and God is leading us further. And we have to show that we are changed by Christ, share our testimonies so other people also do not lose their hope.

‘You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden’ (Matthew 5:14).

In a world where death is so close, there is no point in wasting our time on something that is not



love. We are called to be the ones who bring light, who serve, who help others not to despair. God does not call us to live by fear, but by faith, to be His hands and heart for this world.

'And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love' (1 Corinthians 13:13).

Thank you for your attention. May the Lord bless all of us and give us the strength to do His will even in the most difficult times.

## *Andreas Morsbøl, Denmark*

Relate church

### Intro - Church is Strange

Hi, my name is Andreas Morsbøl Gram and I am member of UMC Copenhagen. I am very pleased to address you now as lay-delegate.

Church is strange

It's April and that means my son will turn 1 this month. It's only a few weeks ago since I returned from paternity leave. I spend the time going to church, as baby psalm singing is a fun way to activate the kid - and the churches are full! There are cosy blankets on the floor, soap bubbles and gesture songs. Many parents have realized how fun and wholesome it is, and they love it.

One time I talked to a dad who was relieved when he told me, he liked the baby psalm singing as long as it wasn't too much about God. We may find that a self-contradictory to have a church not about God, but I think he was actually relieved to find it not so formal and that it was actually relatable to him and his child. Maybe he found it less strange than he expected.

### The Stable Church and the Burn

As a kid church was a good, stable place in my life. My dad used to be a UMC pastor and with my family I always attended Sunday service. I went to Sunday school and to every scout meeting.





Both my parents sang in the choir and there was even a youth choir. My two brothers and I went to summer camps and scout camps and met with friends from all over Denmark. I had a child's faith and believed that the church was a genuinely good place. When we moved to another town the church was there again - as a good, stable place.

But the church failed. My parents had a major crisis with it, which is why we moved town. As a family we got a cold shoulder from our local church, and I saw how my parents got hurt. They didn't talk to us children about it and we continued attending scout meetings and camps - but something had shifted.

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To me the Methodist Church, is homelike. I one time saw the UMC cross and flame out of the blue on a wall in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. I instantly felt a little at home so far from home. I think most of my family would feel the same, though the church failed us. Thick-headed, yes, maybe, but I don't think I'm overstating when I say our identity is closely linked to the methodist church. And if the church burned us, wouldn't it then be a major personal crisis? It was to me.

## Reconciliation

I have been thinking. I have been conflicted about church. I have questioned whether I should be part of this church and even whether I would call myself a christian. Is this anything for me? One and a half years ago I finished a year-long therapy program with weekly meetings. I have done one other long-term treatment and around three years of individual psychotherapy. My ruminations have been severe and concerned issues that resulted in personal insecurity, a lack of self-worth, depression, and anxiety symptoms - and the therapy has helped me! I was hurt, deeply confused and I know now that the church burned me and my family.

I worked on other issues too, but one time a therapist called me religiously indoctrinated, which I don't reject entirely. I trusted the church, and the church hurt me. Why would I go back to someone who hurt me? Mindless, right?

Now, as I said, I have been thinking. Is it worth it? Isn't it just a really small community in urgent need of fresh air, both morally and culturally? I returned only with great caution, but: Last year I had my son. I married my wife. I have a stable place to live. I have plans for the future. I would not have worked that out without the church. Without support from friends at my local church, a



constant inspiration from the biblical stories, and God's healing grace I wouldn't have come back. I count therapy as a means to this.

## God's Healing Grace

I recently attended Sunday service at UMC in Strandby in Northern Jutland, Denmark. The pastor Mark Lewis asked us what kind of bait to use when fishing. Strandby is a fishing town, so he got some good answers. What, then, if you are a fisher of people, he asked, while he laid out the story of the call to Simon Peter and Andrew. He suggested love. Be loving and they get hooked. I agree with Mark entirely, but it's maybe a little unspecific. I mean, love? Just put it out there, and they will get hooked, right?

In Strandby they also have the psalm of the Month. This Sunday the psalm of the Month was "Vi finder fred i kirken/We find peace at church" and in the third verse they sing:

Vi lyser op i kirken / We light up in church  
et sted hvor Ånden bruser os i blodet      where the Spirit rushes blood  
hvor ingen af os selv er ledetråden      where the lead is none of us  
hvor dagligdagen bunder      where daily life reaches shallow water  
i verdens største under      in World's greatest Wonder  
og alle lyser lige smukt i gåden      and everyone light up the mystery.

How do you know you are loved? I know I feel loved when I feel seen. If someone goes out of their way for me and for who I am I feel at ease at first, relieved, and then loved. I have experienced it with my wife, of course, in therapy and - in church. Someone is trying to relate by being present and listening - and that's it: To me love is relating.

## Church as our Cross

Now, it's tempting to want to burn the thing that burned you. It's tempting to let something die off to make room for something new. Sometimes it's necessary. It's tempting to disregard anything un-reasonable and strange to get a better public profile and hide away the strangeness of church. But strange is what keeps us going. We are church leaders, after all. We know the means of grace, we have felt the meaning of communion, we have been touched to our heart by the



Word and the Blessing of the Holy Spirit. We might each have our personal Aldersgate experience.

To us God very is relatable. We are familiar with the mystery of Jesus Christ, and comfortable letting it remain a mystery. Un-strange would be pointless. But I think we can sometimes be too strange about the strange. Yes, we pray, yes, we read the Bible, yes, we sing collectively, yes, we go to communion, and yes, we share life and seek support and comfort from each other and the Holy Spirit. That is the point, and it is so giving!

But don't start there. Start by being curious. I'm back at the baby dad I met. People want to make contact, so be curious and ask: Who are you? Why are you here? How's are you? What do you think about it here? What made you come and bring your kid in spite of reluctance to anything church-like?

Jesus called us to follow him in every way. He called us to take up our cross, and as church-leaders maybe church is our cross. The church is as rich and pluralistic as it is problematic and dated. It's made up of people for better or worse, but it's where we light up, and so it's our obligation to make church relatable. Church is strange because God is strange, but we don't have to be strange about that. We can be curious. Be curious about God and people and meet them where they are. Be curious and relevant to them in every possible way. That is love. Relate.

## *Meeli Tankler, Estonia*

I represent the Baltic Annual Conference, which since first of July 2023 consists of Latvia and Lithuania District. I would ask you to keep also the "lost tribe", Estonia, in your prayers as they are continuing to be in mission in their context while seeking to establish their identity as an autonomous Methodist Church. My topic today is the particular context for mission in our Baltic region, and the challenges and possibilities that the church is facing today in relation to society and the surrounding world.

Regarding the church history, Baltic States are not very similar: even as Christianity reached us about the same time, Lithuania remained predominantly Catholic while Estonia and most part of Latvia opened up for Protestantism quite early. Methodism came to all our countries about the same time, but Estonia was the only one where the Methodist church continued to exist through-



out the Soviet occupation era, although quite isolated from the worldwide community. In Latvia and Lithuania, the Methodist church was re-established after regaining the independence in early 1990-s.

However, Baltic States are similar because we all have experienced a fiercely atheistic past, which has shaped significantly people's conscious and unconscious attitude regarding Church and believers. With the regained independence in 1991, all three countries stepped from the communist atheistic worldview immediately into the capitalist secular worldview without having any transitional period. As a result, we see a lot of prejudices and even hatred whenever discussions related or even seemingly related to religion arise in the public arena. For many people, the secular worldview equals atheistic worldview, challenging them to fight both the religion as such as well as those who dare to speak positively about any religious values.

Let me give you a brief glimpse into the atheism presented and practiced in our countries. In 1970-s, as a Soviet university student I also had to take a class in so-called Scientific Atheism. The main idea presented to us was that religion belonged to the past. Here is a quote from the textbook,

„Humanity is moving legitimately, with historical inevitability, from the last exploitative society whose social conditions of life gave birth to and preserved the religion, towards a new communist formation, whose social relations no longer would give rise to supernatural beliefs and where religion as a prejudice of the past would initially still be preserved. The main task of atheist education is to help constructively form a scientific materialistic worldview, and an active life attitude. The purpose of atheism is to lead people to the real values of life and real happiness.” (Kuulo Vimmsaare, the Chair of the department of Philosophy in Tallinn Technical University)

In 2004, a Tartu University professor Atko Remmel in his doctoral dissertation about atheism in Estonia described the continuing influence of atheist propaganda by saying, „widespread as a Soviet heritage is the model of atheism that is attacking believers and churches“. The Soviet atheism was indeed „a fighting atheism“: the issue was not about not believing in God – the issue was about proclaiming this not believing in any god as the one and only true worldview. Writes Vimmsaare, „Soviet people are exalted by an active lifestyle, a conscious attitude to social duty, unity of words and actions. This is a person who knows his own strength and understands his worth, who does not believe in god and is not afraid of devil, whose communist idealism is an amalgam of knowledge, conviction and practical action.”

This was the ideological context for Baltic States as well as most of Eastern Europe for about 50 years, and the influence is still tangible. However, the Pew Research Centre 2017 report about



religion in Europe draws an interesting conclusion: “People in most post-Soviet republics see religion rising in importance, in contrast with other countries in the region.”

In order to deal with today’s challenges and possibilities in our context, I would like to invite you to think about the parable of the lost son (Luke 15) – but to widen it a little bit. I would first raise the question: what was prompting the prodigal son to return home? Yes, he was hungry and penniless and disappointed – but I do believe that the main reason was his memory about home. In his mind, his home was a stable and safe place, managed well and wisely by his caring and loving father. A place with “more than enough food” (Lk 15:17) for the whole household, and with space for everyone who was willing to do some honest work. This memory picture encouraged and attracted him to turn back, and to ask for forgiveness and employment and place to stay.

We do our mission and ministry in the midst of prodigals, but I would say that they are second or third generation prodigals. This means that the memory line has been broken, and we cannot rely on any immediate experience or mind pictures about “the father’s home”. When we think about ordinary people in Baltic countries, most of them probably have no religious memories of their own. These next generation prodigals – and I am speaking also about my own generation here, not just youth – have all kinds of life experiences, come from various backgrounds, and their attitudes about their fathers or childhood homes may not always be positive. They may not be able to imagine (or even believe) a harmonic family life, real abundance in life that exceeds the material level, or trusting relations between people living and working side by side. The idea of going back somewhere in order to ask for forgiveness for any wrongdoings may also not resonate as more and more people in today’s world hardly accept their mistakes, never admit about regretting anything, and do not want to go back – only forward, even if it means getting more lost. If we tell them about the one and only way, they will not believe us, as there is no certainty that the way we are pointing to is better than any other way.

Probably we could best communicate the good news about God’s grace by creating some kind of environment that would resemble the “father’s home” as the Bible is describing it. We could try to create small home-like oases offering a glimpse of what would it mean to be accepted and unconditionally loved. To be safe and cared for. These oases could be book clubs or choir rehearsals; open-invitation-picnics in the city-park or guided walks on nature trails; lecture series for parents of teenagers or conversation opportunities to practice foreign languages; knitting clubs or short courses for IT skills. This is something to consider for all of us, laity, using our creative minds, professional skills, and God-given gifts. A small core group of four or five can already initiate something that suits to a given context. The trick is to listen carefully to the needs of people in our immediate neighborhood, and find creative responses. To offer an atmosphere of genuine unconditional love and care as well as a real abundance in the spiritual and emotional sense.



In due time, some need for help on the journey toward accepting and admitting their possible shortcomings may arise, as well as for guidance about asking for forgiveness both from God and from other people around them in order to mend broken relationships. However, the main thing is still to keep the atmosphere in all these various enterprises open, and as relaxed and loving as possible, and refuse the temptation to use them mainly as tools for recruiting new church members. People need enough space and time to discover God's grace for themselves, and we should be just fellow travelers on this road providing graceful presence, and sharing our God-given love with them. As Paul says, we are called to be "ambassadors who represent Christ" (2Co 5:20) to people around us.

Even as this expression has become a cliché, I have to use it here: while doing this we do need to step out of our comfort zone. Just like the father was running toward his son with open arms, ready to embrace him even before he would say or do anything. Miroslav Volf's concept of embrace as a metaphor for the relationship with "the other" is helpful here. He describes the embrace as first opening our arms for "the other" as a sign of openness and willingness to be in relationship; then waiting for "the other" to open their arms also (which in mission context may require a long time before the mutual trust is born!). The next step would be closing the arms around "the other" in hope that they would also close their arms ("It takes two pairs of arms for one embrace", says Volf), and finally opening the arms again. To let go – or to embrace each other again. I believe this is the attitude we all need for a real mission: to be open for people who are different from us; to accept them on their terms, not ours; and to be patient even if they choose to walk away again after a while. Because the missional embrace is never a trap where people cannot get out.

I read an Estonian novel recently about the 12th century when first Christian monks were coming to Estonia proclaiming their message, and people were suspicious. It suddenly struck me how similar is the situation today. The main character in this novel, a young man longing to see the wide world, meeting new people and struggling with newly formed questions about Christianity hears the simple message that this God of Christianity actually loves people. This is something that is hard for him to believe, and at the same time is inviting him to believe. In today's world people struggle with the same issue. The message about God's love is not easy to believe. Maybe our best mission strategy would be not just pointing to the direction where the right way to father's home is or explaining the best routes. Maybe our best mission strategy would be walking lovingly together with our people on the journey on an unknown road to the unknown father's home who is waiting to embrace them with the same love he has embraced all the prodigals.





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