

# UMC – Central and Southern Europe

## A Brief History of The United Methodist Church

### Ecclesial Heritage of Methodism

The ecclesial heritage of The United Methodist Church is rooted in a renewal movement in the Church of England in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Before, in the early 1500s, various reform movements emerged in Europe that created forms of western Christianity known as Protestantism, and no more in communion with the Roman Catholic pope. They emphasized a return to the sources of faith: that is, God's action in salvation and Scripture as the authority for doctrine and practice. In England, it was shaped into the particular identity of Anglicanism.

During the late 1600s, renewal movements, often referred to as Pietism, emerged in Europe, emphasizing the Christian experience of new birth, sanctification, societal transformation, and small groups. The movement affected most confessions including Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, and Anabaptist. Expressions of this movement in Germany included the philanthropic and missional work of August Hermann Franke, the growth and expansion of Moravians under the leadership of Count Ludwig von Zinzendorf, as well as the Religious Societies begun by Anthony Horneck in England, all of which influenced the emerging Methodist movement under the leadership of John Wesley (1703-1791) and his brother Charles (1707-1788).

For all their lives, both Wesley brothers remained faithful priests of the Church of England and considered her as the best of all churches. Early in their theological studies, they decided to live a holy life, pleasing to God. It was their conversion to holiness, loving God with all their heart. In Oxford, the older brother John led a movement of students, and they were called – among other nicknames – the “Methodists”. Under the leadership of John and together with Charles and a few other students, they decided to go to the American colonies as missionaries to the Natives. They encountered different groups of Pietists. Discouraged in their ministry, both brothers Wesley returned to England and again met Moravian missionaries, who were preparing to travel to the American colonies. Under their influence, Charles and John Wesley both experienced being reconciled with God by grace alone. They had discovered justification by faith. John felt his heart “strangely warmed”, filled by love from God in a way that transformed him from a zealous preacher to a love-filled evangelist of Good News to the Poor. It was their second, evangelical conversion.

Another former student among the Methodists at Oxford, George Whitefield, who briefly returned from the American colonies to England, had made a similar experience. In 1739, he began to preach outside of church buildings in the open field to poor miners, soon gathering several thousands. Many responded in repentance of their sins and wanting to lead a life transformed by Christ. As Whitefield planned to return to the colonies, he called on his former teacher, John Wesley, and his brother Charles to take over with field preaching. It was the beginning of the Methodist renewal movement within the Church of England. The goal of John and Charles Wesley was “to reform the nation, particularly the church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land”. “Scriptural” meant for them: rooted in justification by faith through grace alone. Whitefield was the initiator of this Methodist renewal, but on the long term, the movement which was connected to the Wesley brothers grew more. It became better organized in “United Societies” and smaller “classes”, on both sides of the Atlantic. Publications like the collection of Charles Wesley's hymns and John Wesley's sermons, together with a multitude of tracts shaped the identity of the early Methodists.

### Methodism in America from 1760 to its mission to the European Continent

Most other Protestant denominations had established themselves in the American colonies long before the Methodists. Methodism connected to the Wesley brothers began in American colonies rather late through laypeople emigrating to America around 1760. Among them was a Methodist laypreacher

from Ireland (Philip Embury) who had German family origins. Methodist laypeople soon asked John Wesley to send preachers. The Wesley brothers never again travelled to America, but John sent two first preachers in 1769. Others followed thereafter, among them Francis Asbury. The American Revolution profoundly impacted Methodism. John Wesley's loyalty to the king and his writings against the revolutionary cause did not enhance the image of Methodism among those who supported independence.

When independence from England was won, Wesley recognised that changes were necessary for American Methodism to thrive. As the Bishop of London had refused ordination of Methodist preachers, John Wesley ordained two of them for the work in the newly formed United States of America. He also sent Thomas Coke, an Anglican priest and Methodist, to America for superintending the work with Asbury. Coke brought with him an abridgment of the "Book of Common Prayer" entitled "The Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America" and an abridgment of the Church of England's Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, both prepared by Wesley.

In December 1784, the famous "Christmas Conference" of preachers was held in Baltimore. Most of the American preachers attended, probably including African American preachers. At this gathering the movement became organized and then known as "The Methodist Episcopal Church" in America. Its name reflected its Anglican heritage in the "Episcopal Church" with the specific denominator "Methodist". Soon the superintendents, Coke and Asbury, were considered the two first bishops of the church. A first quadrennial General Conference of all preachers was held in 1792, but because of the growth of the movement General Conference became a conference composed only of delegates from each annual conference in 1808.

Two other churches were forming in America, which, in their earliest years were composed almost entirely of German-speaking people. The first was founded by Otterbein, a Reformed pastor, and Boehm, a Mennonite. Otterbein had been present at the "Christmas Conference" and had participated in the ordination of Asbury. Otterbein and Boehm preached an evangelical message similar to the Methodists. In 1800, the movement was organized into the Church of the "United Brethren in Christ" (UBC). The second church among German settlers was begun by Albright, a Lutheran farmer, converted by the United Brethren in Christ and nurtured in a Methodist class meeting. He wanted to reach out to fellow German-speakers and established a connection of preachers that was officially organized into the "Evangelical Association" (EA) in 1803.

Early attempts at merging these churches failed. In the USA, the two churches of German background united in 1946 into "The Evangelical United Brethren Church" (EUBC) with the "Evangelical Association" (EA) as the smaller partner. The EUBC in turn joined with the much larger "The Methodist Church" (MC) in 1968 to form "The United Methodist Church" (UMC). On the European continent, all three churches were present, but their sizes and the history of their unions were different.

The Second Great Awakening was the dominant religious development among Protestants in America during the first half of the nineteenth century. Through revivals and camp meetings, sinners experienced conversion. Circuit-riding preachers and lay pastors knit them into a connection. Methodists were strictly guided by the "General Rules", published by John Wesley for his "United Societies" in 1743. They committed not to do harm, do good, and use the means of grace supplied by God. And they had to be faithful in attending their own local small group ("class"). That formed their initial "Discipline". Those who did not remain faithful to the "Discipline" were not renewed in their membership. Through the itinerant ministry of its preachers, the church spread to the people wherever they settled. Annual conferences were the basic body of the church where the itinerating, ordained preachers met once a year. General Conference that had become a quadrennially meeting as a delegated body, kept the unity among the annual conferences and edited the "Book of Discipline" which initially included the liturgy and requirements for the ongoing education of the preachers.

In the midst of tremendous growth, there were also tensions, especially over episcopacy, race, slavery and lay membership in annual conference that eventually led to several splits. African Americans

created separate churches because they were not fully recognised on equal level to white people in the existing churches. In 1830, issues of lay representation and superintendency led to the creation of the "Methodist Protestant Church" (MPC). In 1844, the issue of slavery led to the creation of the "Methodist Episcopal Church South" (MEC South), in the southern States of the USA. In 1920, the MEC South began mission in three war-torn countries of Europe where their northern counterpart had not yet been present. In 1939, the three churches (Methodist Episcopal Church, Methodist Episcopal Church South, and Methodist Protestant Church) united to form "The Methodist Church". But in Europe, celebrating this union was overshadowed by the outbreak of World War II.

In countries that have been part of the central conference of Central and Southern Europe or its predecessors, the British Methodist mission through its Wesleyan Missionary Society (WMS) was present in Austria, France, Germany, North Africa, Spain and Switzerland; the United Brethren in Christ (UBC) only in Germany; the Evangelical Association (EA) in Austria, France, Germany, Poland, and Switzerland; The Methodist Episcopal Church South (MECS) in Belgium, the Czech and Slovak Republics, and in Poland; and the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) in almost all countries of the central conference.

### Methodist mission to the European continent

Migration was the most powerful factor in building a web of relationships for Methodist mission. In most instances, lay people were instrumental in calling for ordained preachers to help organize the work and spread it further. The mission to the European continent began with British Methodists much earlier than with American Methodists. However, British Methodists often kept to the initial aim of reviving personal faith among Protestants on the continent, similarly to their own origins as a renewal movement within the Church of England and the Church of Ireland. American Methodists usually came a few decades later. They were already a church distinct from their Anglican roots and found it natural to establish a Methodist church through their mission endeavours. Therefore, they often waited until civil laws allowed for the presence of a new denomination.

European Methodism began, as migrants, sailors, merchants, soldiers, and others who had encountered Methodism on the other side of the Atlantic, shared the message back home. Ludwig Jacoby joined the Methodist Episcopal Church after immigrating to Cincinnati in 1838. He returned to Germany as an ordained elder in 1849 and began gathering a church in Bremen. In 1845, Sebastian Kurz as a lay preacher of the Evangelical Association went back to Germany on a private initiative and began to preach. It led to the sending of a first ordained preacher, Conrad Link, in 1850. Olaf Gustaf Hedström, of Sweden, led the mission of the "Bethel Ship John Wesley" in New York harbour for over 30 years, beginning in 1845. Many seamen and emigrants who experienced conversion in the Bethel Ship, then carried the Methodist revival with them to other parts of the United States as well as to their home countries in Northern Europe. Norwegian seaman Ole Peter Petersen, after hearing Methodists in Boston and responding to an "altar call" in the Bethel Ship began preaching to Norwegians and Danes in America and Norway in 1849. Examples could be multiplied. Migration related to existing personal relationships through families and old and new friendships heavily influenced the direction of the Methodist mission on the European continent.

Hereafter follows a timeline when Methodist mission began in a country of the central conference of Central and Southern Europe of The United Methodist Church or its predecessors, indicating also the initial churches being instrumental in planting Methodism. The sign (→) and an end date is given, if the church ended its presence or entered into a larger union of Protestant churches. The ordering is according to the beginning of the mission. The country name reflects present realities. Countries with \* do not belong to the present central conference of Central and Southern Europe:

- France: WMS (1791-1939, then → Reformed); EA (1868ff); MEC (1905-35, then → Reformed with MEC only remaining in Alsace); 1968/72: EA and MEC/MC united into UMC;
- \* Belgium: WMS (1816- ca.1839), MECS (1920-69), then → United Protestant Church of Belgium, affiliated with UMC

- \* Spain: WMS (1834-1839, 1869ff), then → Spanish Evangelical Church); MEC (1919-1939), then → Spanish Evangelical Church)
- Switzerland: WMS (1840-1900), then → MEC; MEC (1856ff); EA (1866ff); 1968/72: EA and MEC/MC united into UMC
- \* Germany: WMS (1830-1897) → MEC; MEC (1849ff); EA (1850ff); UBC (1869-1905) → MEC; 1968 EA and MEC/MC united into UMC → CC Germany
- \* Bulgaria: MEC (1857ff) /MC/UMC (-2022); 2022 Global Methodist Church)
- Austria: WMS (1870-1897), then → MEC/MC/UMC; EA (1929-34)
- North Macedonia: American Board, congregationalist (1873-1921), → then MEC/MC/UMC)
- Albania: MEC (1881 / 1920-?); UMC (1998 / 2008ff)
- Algeria: WMS (1886-1919), then → MEC; MEC (1908ff) /MC/UMC)
- \* Russia: MEC (1889- ca. 1931); UMC 1990/91ff → CC Northern Europe and Eurasia;
- Poland: EA (ca. 1895-1945), then → MC; MECS (1920ff) /MC/UMC
- Hungary: MEC (1898ff) /MC/UMC
- Serbia: MEC (1899ff) /MC/UMC
- Tunisia: MEC (1908ff) /MC/UMC)
- Czech Republic: MECS (1920ff) → MC/UMC
- \* Croatia: MEC (ca. 1923-26); UMC (1995-2006); 2022 Global Methodist Church
- \* Slovak Republic: MECS (1924ff) → MC/UMC (-2022); 2022 Global Methodist Church
- \* Ukraine: MECS (ca. 1925ff) → MC/UMC → CC Northern Europe and Eurasia;
- \* Kosovo: MEC/MC (1920s / 1937-1970s)
- Romania: UMC (2011ff)

## The establishment of central conference(s) in Europe

Methodist churches all had their missionary societies. In the MEC and MECS, women created their own women societies. A mission field was dependent on the missionary society. However, there was a strong intention to encourage indigenous leadership which was much easier in situations related to strong migration. In the US-tradition of Methodism, a Mission in a country soon became a Missionary Conference. When there were enough ordained elders, it became an Annual Conference with its own authority to make decisions, but usually still heavily dependent on financial support from the Missionary Society of the mother church. In the early 1900s, some countries came close to financial self-support like Switzerland and Sweden.

Annual conferences in territories outside the USA wanted to intensify their contact and cooperation with neighbouring annual conferences in their own region and not only relate to the mission board in the USA. In the MEC, this gave rise to the creation of a "Central Mission Conference", at first in India in the 1880s. It developed into establishing "Central Conferences" in all regions outside the USA. The MECS and the EA adopted very similar patterns of central conferences.

For the MEC in Europe, a "Central Council of the Conferences and Missions" met for a first time in Berlin in 1895. In 1900, Bishop John H. Vincent became the first Methodist bishop to take up residence in Europe, in Zurich. Under his presidency, a second MEC Congress met in Zurich in 1903. In 1904, William Burt, an American of British origin, former superintendent in Italy, was elected bishop by the General Conference, became assigned to Europe and took residence in Rome. A third European Congress, held in Copenhagen in 1907, adopted a motion to General Conference for authorizing the organisation of a Central Conference for Europe. A quarterly magazine "Methodism in Europe" was edited. The very first Central Conference for all of Europe met in Rome in 1911 under Bishop Burt. In 1912, Bishop John L. Nuelsen was assigned to Europe, after a four years-term among German speaking annual conferences in the USA. He had been born in Zurich in a first generation MEC preacher's family. He took residence in Switzerland (office in Zurich, but different places of personal residence). As the majority of Methodist members in Europe were German speaking, they appreciated to hear a bishop speaking in their own tongue, for the first time.

Between 1916-20, Bishop Nuelsen received the help of Bishop Anderson, of Scandinavian descent, for the episcopal supervision in the Scandinavian countries, in France, Italy and North Africa. In 1920, General Conference launched an impressive Jubilee mission initiative for strengthening its worldwide outreach. It increased the total number of bishops from 31 to 38 and gave to 17 of them residence outside the USA. Europe now received officially three bishops, two new ones in addition to Nuelsen. At the second session of the European Central Conference in 1922, the three episcopal areas were organized. Somehow – maybe through the effects of World War I – they became, after the General Conference 1924, three distinct central conferences, each with one bishop. Nuelsen became the bishop for the central conference of Central Europe, residing in Switzerland, with the countries of Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Hungary, and, for some years, also Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and Russia. There was a second central conference of Northern Europe with the newly elected Dane Anton Bast as its bishop for the Scandinavian countries, and, since 1928 also Russia. The third central conference was for Southern Europe with Bishop Blake who took residence in Paris for the countries around the Mediterranean Sea with France, Spain, Italy, North Africa, and, after 1928, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. In 1928, Bishop Shepard became the successor for Southern Europe. But he died in 1931 while in office. The central conference of Southern Europe was dissolved in 1932 and parts of it came again to the episcopal region of Central Europe as far as mission fields were not given up due to the economic crisis during the 1930s, thus combining it into a central conference for Central and Southern Europe.

Two other important changes happened in the 1930s:

(1) In 1936, Germany became a Central Conference of its own. By that time, a central conference had received the authority to elect their own bishop and Germany used that new possibility. With the annexation of Austria by Germany in 1938, the Methodist work was transferred to the Central Conference of Germany. These events drastically reduced the countries belonging to the former central conference of Central Europe.

(2) In 1939, the union of three churches, the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC), the Methodist Episcopal Church South (MECS), and the Methodist Protestant Church (MPC) took place, forming “The Methodist Church” (MC). The MECS in Belgium, Czechoslovakia and Poland had also created a kind of central conference, but with bishops residing in the USA. The MPC never had a mission to the European Continent. A “Uniting Conference” with representatives from all European countries met in Copenhagen in August 1939, but the outbreak of World War II made it impossible to organize the addition of the three countries of the MECS to the central conference of Central and Southern Europe of The Methodist Church.

### **The central conference of Central and Southern Europe, re-established in 1954**

With the outbreak of World War II, the remaining parts of the two central conferences of Central Europe and of Southern Europe were at first related to the South-Eastern Jurisdiction in the USA. Interim bishops took oversight, as far as episcopal visits were possible. They usually took residence in Geneva and the episcopal area became known as the Geneva Area. There were ongoing discussions on how to organize the European field and viable central conferences, linked to tensions towards Germany but also consequences of Communist take-over in countries of central eastern Europe. Finally, the central conference of Central and Southern Europe was again officially constituted in 1954 in Brussels, Belgium.

Concerning the formation of central conferences, the Evangelical Association had followed the movement of the larger Methodist sisters. The European field had petitioned the 1922 General Conference to establish a central conference structure for Europe. In 1924, a first central conference of the Evangelical Association for Europe was established with representatives of three annual conferences (North Germany, South Germany, and Switzerland). The presiding bishop always was a US citizen. For a short period, he took residence in Germany, but as he was not regularly in Europe, he did not always preside at annual conferences. With the world-wide church union of 1968, creating “The United Methodist Church” (UMC), the annual conference of the Evangelical Association for Switzerland and France was united with the annual conference of the Methodist Church in 1972. These were the only two countries where both churches were present within the central conference of Central and Southern

Europe. In some regions of Switzerland, the Evangelical Association was numerically almost as strong as the Methodist Church, in France even much bigger.

At the reconstitution of the central conference of Central and Southern Europe of “The Methodist Church” in Brussels 1954, voting delegates from the following countries could be present: Austria, Belgium, Northern Africa (Algeria and Tunisia) Switzerland, and Yugoslavia. The bishop again resided in Zurich where an office had remained. The Methodist presence was by far the strongest in Switzerland. Due to its status as a neutral country, stable economy, and very generous Methodist members, it has shown a long history of solidarity with war-torn or otherwise economically much poorer Methodist churches in other countries of the central conference.

The first bishop elected in the newly formed central conference of Central and Southern Europe was Ferdinand Sigg (1954-1965 as active bishop) who died in active service in 1965. During his episcopal ministry, he was only irregularly allowed to travel to communist countries, and all over the time of communist regimes, there was no possibility to organize an annual conference in Bulgaria under the supervision of the bishop of the central conference. Bishop Sigg was strongly engaged in the ecumenical movement.

At an extra session of the central conference in 1966, Bishop Franz Schäfer (1966-89 as active bishop) was elected as successor. During his time as active bishop, travel to communist countries was mostly allowed to annual conferences, except for Bulgaria. Belgium left the central conference in 1969 for uniting with other Protestant Churches in the country. With his upright and unideological approach to every human person, including high government officials in communist countries where he had been put under pressure, Bishop Schäfer was able to establish mutually respectful relationships over time.

In March 1989, Bishop Heinrich Bolleter (1989-2006 as active bishop) was elected. No one expected the fast political changes that began in the fall of the same year. In the 1990s, inhabitants of former communist countries in eastern central Europe and the Balkans experienced a revival of interest in faith and joining Christian churches. The presence of the United Methodist Church expanded in the midst of economic and political uncertainties. Two churches in Western Ukraine were transferred to the newly established Eurasian episcopal area that had launched United Methodist churches in other parts of Ukraine. A new missionary presence began in Albania (in the 1990s, and officially established in 2008) and Croatia (for a limited time 1995-2006). Bishop Bolleter succeeded in being close to people in their journey in huge transitions in society and building up communion in the church.

In 2005 Bishop Patrick Streiff was elected (2005/6-2022 as active bishop). In 2011, independent churches in Romania joined the United Methodist Church. In early 2022, Bulgaria decided to leave the United Methodist Church.

In November 2022, an extra session of the central conference elected Bishop Stefan Zürcher for leading the central conference. All over its existence, the central conference of Central and Southern Europe was a strong means for building relationships between its countries, supporting each other’s mission and creating a bond of unity among United Methodists.

# List of bishops with years in supervisory role in countries now belonging to CC-CSE

Note: after 1924 without the central conference of Northern Europe (and Eurasia)

## **MEC, Episcopal supervision on all of Europe since 1900, and 1912-1924 as CC Europe**

John Vincent, Zurich (1900-1904)

William Burt, Rome (1904-1912)

John Nuelsen, Zurich (1912-1940)

### **MEC, CC Southern Europe (1924-1932)**

Edgar Blake, Paris (1924-1928)

William Shepard, Paris (1928-1931+)

Raymond Wade, Paris (1931-1932)

1932 CC dissolved



### **MEC, CC Central Europe (1924-1940)**

John Nuelsen, Zurich/Lausanne

1936 CC reduced

(new CC Germany)



### **MECS, CC Europe (1926-1940)**

James Atkins (1920-1922)

William Beauchamp (1922-1926)

Urban Darlington (1926-1934)

Arthur Moore (1934-1940)

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### **Evangelical Association / EUBC, CC Europe (since 1922/24)**

Gottlieb Heinmiller (+1922?), EA

Samuel Umbreit, Berlin

(1926-1934), EA

After 1934?



George Epp (1947- ?), EUBC

1936-1940: John L. Nuelsen, Geneva (1912-1940)

### **1939: The Methodist Church (MC), Geneva Area of the South Eastern Jurisdiction**

William Peele (1940-1942)

Arthur Moore (1942-1944)

Paul N. Garber, Geneva (1944-1952)

Arthur Moore, Geneva (1952-1954)

### **Since 1954: MC, CC Central and Southern Europe**

Ferdinand Sigg, Zurich (1954-1965+)

Paul N. Garber / Ralph Dodge (1965-1966)

Franz Schäfer, Zurich (1966-1989)

### **1968: The United Methodist Church, CC Central and Southern Europe**

Franz Schäfer, Zurich (1966-1989)

Heinrich Bolleter, Zurich (1989-2006)

Patrick Streiff, Zurich (2005/6-2022/23)

Stefan Zürcher, Zurich (2022/23 ff)

