



Evangelisch-methodistische Kirche Gebiet von Mittel- und Südeuropa
Eglise Méthodiste Unie Région de l'Europe du Centre et du Sud
United Methodist Church Area of Central and Southern Europe

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Message after the meeting of the Executive Committee of the central conference of Central and Southern Europe to the United Methodists in the Episcopal area

„TURN AWAY FROM EVIL! DO GOOD! SEEK PEACE AND GO AFTER IT!“ (PSALM 34:15)

Dear United Methodists in Central and Southern Europe,

I greet you with the same biblical motto as in the pastoral letter which I sent out after the called session of General Conference.

A week later, the executive committee of the central conference met for its regular, yearly meeting, March 6-10, in Monospitovo, Macedonia. The executive committee became aware that the decisions of General Conference in favor of the "Traditional Plan" have been received among us in very different or opposite ways, by some with gratefulness, by others with great incomprehension. According to what we know from discussions before General Conference, the acceptance of the "One Church Plan" would have led also to opposite results among us, but with reversed signs.

There are very diverse convictions among us on a Christian and biblical perspective on faithfully lived partnerships between two persons of same sex and restrictions on ministry by such persons. As Executive Committee, we have come to realize that this single question tears us apart in ways which even the opposition of communist and capitalist East-West split up to 1989/1990 was not able to accomplish among the countries of the episcopal area.

The petitions of the "Traditional Plan" which were accepted by a majority of 53% at General Conference are only a part of all the petitions belonging to that plan. The supporters of the plan have already announced that they want to bring the missing parts before General Conference 2020. In its entirety, the "Traditional Plan" will not only be a continuation of the traditional opinion in the UMC concerning marriage and homosexuality, but also elevate this one issue to a church dividing doctrine in our worldwide church. The adopted plan will not allow us to continue our ministry with the present Book of Discipline of the central conference beyond March 2021.

On all conference levels of the church, the full implementation of the "Traditional Plan" will request an unconditional application, signed in writing. Persons who are in leadership positions (Bishops, annual conferences, Boards of Ordained Ministry, clergy, and local churches) and who do not give such unconditional acceptance, shall, according to the "Traditional Plan", have to leave the United Methodist Church.

In a comment after General Conference, I said that I regret the fact that the Traditional Plan raises the question of a faithfully lived same-sex partnership and ministry by such people to the level of a church-splitting issue as a foundational doctrine. In the meeting of the executive committee, I raised the deeper issue and question: **What kind of Church do we want to be, based on Scripture and formed by the heritage of the Wesley brothers?** Do we remain a Church rooted in God's grace and centered in holiness of heart and life in love to God and neighbor? Or do we become a Church which seeks purity and excludes what she sees as impure, as sin? Would there not be other possibilities for upholding traditional convictions and still living the church community lovingly with other persons who follow Jesus Christ and have different convictions concerning faithfully lived same-sex partnerships?

In several local churches in countries in Western Europe, we already live together as church members of different convictions. In these countries, we have Professing Members and friends (mostly of heterosexual orientation) who do not recognize the present development in the United Methodist Church any more as their beloved church and wonder whether they have to leave. As Bishop, I understand my role as a spiritual leader for all United Methodists, **on both sides of the issue**. The words of Jesus came to my mind: *"I have other sheep that don't belong to this sheep pen. I must lead them too. They will listen to my voice and there will be one flock, with one shepherd."* (John 10:16) As episcopal leader in central and southern Europe, I want to keep community with all those who confess that they listen to the voice of our great Shepherd, Jesus Christ, on both sides. Will there be another form of a spiritual home in the Methodist tradition for those who feel excluded?

Therefore, the Executive Committee of the central conference has created **a study group** for studying and evaluating scenario(s) for staying as closely united and / or connected as possible under circumstances that divide us. The study group will remain in dialogue with the other episcopal areas in Europe. It will give its report to the executive committee in March 2020. Furthermore, the Executive Committee has also decided that:

- The annual conferences in 2019 do not need to make any votes on any plans or petitions of General Conference 2019, but of course may have discussions and "straw-votes" on tendencies of opinions among members of the annual conference;
- The annual conferences in 2020 will all be held after General Conference in May 5-15, 2020, in order to know its decisions.

As I already pointed out in the pastoral letter, the present discipline for central and southern Europe will remain valid till the central conference will meet in March 2021. **We need to use this time wisely. As executive committee, we have the urgent and important desire that United Methodist members and friends do not leave the church now. They should find a spiritual home and possibilities to use their gifts in a Methodist church, also for the future.** The study group will be a help for working proactively towards creative solutions. We need to continue the discussions mentioned in my pastoral letter. Even more, we need to continue to pray for wisdom and guidance, in the months ahead. Let me close this letter with the same words as the pastoral letter:

The biblical motto for 2019 takes up two of the three rules in the General Rules for Methodists: to turn away from evil and to do good. If we add the third rule, to use the means of grace, we will stretch out personally (e.g. in prayer and fasting) and communally (e.g. attending the worship services in our congregation and Holy Communion) to be nourished by God's grace. This will strengthen us for seeking peace in the connection of our Church and in the witness to the world.

In looking up to Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior who is also the head of the Church, the Executive Committee of the central conference greets you all,



Bishop Patrick Streiff,
Chairperson of the executive committee of the central conference