



Shalom bearers – a word from the bishop

To the Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe

from March 13-16, 2025

Dear delegates

Dear members with an advisory vote

Dear guests

"Shalom with you!" With this blessing, I greet you at the Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe. May God grant us his shalom during these days. And may this be reflected in our conferencing here and afterwards in our ministry in everyday life

I am not presenting you with a bishop's message, as was the case at the previous Central Conferences, but with this "Word from the bishop". In it I give you a little insight into my experiences over the past two years or so (Part II) and share with you what is important to me in my ministry (Part III). At the beginning, however, there are thoughts on the Central Conference motto "Shalom with you" and observations in the conference area (Part I).

I. "Shalom with you"

"Shalom with you!" (John 20:21) This is how the resurrected Jesus greets his deeply unsettled disciples. They had locked themselves in out of fear after his death. This traditional greeting is reminiscent of the promise of peace from Jesus' farewell speech: "I give you peace, *my* peace, not the peace that the world gives. Do not be afraid, do not be dismayed!" (John 14:27) Peace, *shalom* in Hebrew, means comprehensive blessing, the fullness of life from God's hand for individuals and the community. It comes from God, who longs for healed relationships with people, and it exceeds the possibilities of human efforts to achieve peace. It is the fruit of the transforming encounter with Jesus Christ, who is "our peace" (Ephesians 2:14).

The followers of Jesus receive the Holy Spirit, who takes them anew into God's shalom and makes them bearers of shalom. This is how Jesus sends them. He sends them to carry God's shalom out into the world, into the cities, towns and homes. (Luke 10:5) For that is God's mission in this world: to create shalom, comprehensive well-being for all people and creatures. His disciples were involved in this, we are involved in this as individuals and as a church. We are called to embody God's shalom in this world through our presence and actions and thus participate in God's shalom actions.



How can we respond to this call? God's shalom has four dimensions. I will illustrate them with the image of the vine and give examples of how we, in our Central Conference, help to spread God's shalom.

God's shalom has a spiritual dimension. This is directed towards a healthy relationship with God. Every year, our church in Poland organizes renewal days in which more than 300 people of all

ages take part. Services and times of worship, lectures, and group discussions, as well as table fellowship and other activities create a space for an encounter with God. Through this encounter, participants experience the renewal and deepening of their personal relationship with God. The *net monastery* in Switzerland is part of the "Kirche anders" circuit and uses the digital tools to organize daily communal times of silence and prayer. At *evangelization evenings* in North Macedonia, our pastors invite listeners into a relationship with Jesus Christ and guide them in letting him shape their lives. Under the most difficult conditions, our pastors in North Africa find ways to strengthen Christians in their faith and tell people about the Gospel. Men and women come to faith and are baptized.



The branches are firmly attached to the vine.



The branch is healthy and bears fruit.

*God's shalom has an individual, personal dimension. This is aimed at a healthy relationship with oneself. With the *Faces of Courage project*, our church in Romania supported women who had fled Ukraine in coming to terms with their experiences. It accompanied them on the rocky road to reconciliation with their own history. And the *work with orphans* helps to strengthen their identity so that they can courageously follow their path in life. In France and other countries, pastors provide pastoral care to elderly people in retirement homes on their last earthly journey. Our church in the Czech Republic commissions pastors to provide pastoral care in prisons and helps young drug addicts to find a way out*

of their addiction with the *Point 14* project in Pilsen.

*God's shalom has a social, societal dimension. This is aimed at healthy relationships with fellow human beings and a life-enhancing human community. A few years ago, our church in Budapest, Hungary, was given two public schools by the state. Our church runs these schools on the basis of Christian values, and pastors and lay people from our church provide religious education and also supportively accompany the teachers. Like the two schools in Hungary, the *Korab Kindergarden* in*



Many branches grow together on the vine.

Pivnice, Serbia, gives children important values and experiences of community on their journey through life. The *lunch table* in Vrbas, Serbia, the *Miss Stone Center* in Strumica, North Macedonia, or the *potato project* in Buzaishtë, Albania, and many other social-diaconal offers in our countries, especially those with refugees, help to provide those in need with the necessities of life, such as food, but also with the experience of human community and warmth. They all contribute to a life-enhancing society.



Animals find food in the vines.

God's shalom has a cosmic dimension. This is aimed at healthy relationships with co-creation. At the annual conference (AC) 2023, our church in Austria set up a "Climate" working group to develop principles and assistance for the church in dealing with the resources of creation. It adopted a resolution on climate change for the attention of the federal government. In 2024, a person responsible for the area of *responsibility for creation* was elected.

In Switzerland, the "Environmental Justice" working group was set up at the AC 2023. Its task is to clarify what contribution we as a church can make to a more careful and sustainable use of limited natural resources. It is to develop suggestions on how this can be done in concrete terms.

More examples could be listed. I am thinking of the *Diakonie Zentrum Spattstrasse* in Linz, Austria, or the *Early Intervention Center* in Tirana, Albania. Through all of them, our local churches are making God's shalom tangible, and God's shalom is spreading. At the same time, we are constantly faced with the challenge of keeping our eyes and hearts open. In doing so, we recognize the changing social situations and learn to embody God's shalom in other ways, to be a "different" church. In this way, with our possibilities and special talents as Methodists, we are bearers of shalom.

II. Experiences and challenges

I want to *build bridges* through my service. The building material for this are encounters. They are an indispensable and valuable part of my ministry, especially in the first few years. I want to get to know and understand the pastors and leaders and our church and local churches in the 13 countries of our CC with their respective cultural, social, political, historical and, of course, religious contexts better. I hope that at the same time I will also become a little more tangible for our brothers and sisters. Relationships develop and grow in the process. Through encounters, a fruitful exchange of information and honest experiences as well as spiritual impulses, I would like to contribute to connecting people with each other, to continue building a sustainable network of relationships and to deepen trust among each other. As a consequence of the many challenges we face, I sense uncertainty, fears, frustration or discouragement here and there. I would like to help strengthen our hope, encourage and empower us to participate confidently, calmly and joyfully in God's mission.

Experience

On my travels over the past two years, I have had the opportunity to visit many of the projects and branches of work I have described. I have met committed and talented women and men who joyfully give their time, energy and love to our mission of passing on God's shalom. This is true even if the associated difficulties and people's need sometimes give rise to resignation rather than joy.

As I mentioned, an essential and wonderful part of my ministry is the travel, the meetings and the many conversations with leaders, employees, church members, ecumenical representatives and political leaders in the countries of our Central Conference. I am always impressed by the hospitality I encounter. I experience table fellowship and eating together or praying and celebrating together as moments of shared life and faith and also enjoyment. At the same time, I don't want to underestimate the fact that in some situations, this also involves struggling together for clarity, solutions, and the next steps.

On the road at annual conferences and Districts

Pastors' meetings are held at the annual conference and District level. Last year I attended all of them except for those of our Austrian brothers and sisters: France, North Africa, Poland, Serbia-North Macedonia-Albania, the Czech Republic, Switzerland and Hungary-Romania. Celebrating together, Bible studies and thematic workshops, walks, excursions and, of course, table fellowship are good opportunities to get to know each other better, but also to share the joys and challenges of ministry

Church visits, sometimes combined with preaching or a Bible study, give an insight into the diversity of how our church lives and shapes its mission. For example, I like to remember the twelve-day trip to North Macedonia, Albania and Serbia in September 2024, on which my wife Valérie accompanied me. In addition to the pastors' meetings, we visited various local churches, including Buzaishtë in the mountains of Albania - an adventurous experience with four-wheel drive vehicles - or in Serbia Vrbas and Pivnice with the Korab kindergarten. The children there had prepared a fun animal quiz for us and wanted to know what the animals were called in German. The highlight of the trip was the ordination of Florian Çela and Gjergj Lushka in Pogradec, Albania. This was attended by pastors from the entire annual conference. In Poland, we first visited Ełk in beautiful Masuria at the beginning of August and then the Renewal Days in central Poland with Adam Hamilton as speaker, as well as local churches in southern Poland at the end of October as part of the journey with Connexio Governing Board.

Trips like those to the Balkans, where we often spend many hours in the car, always offer a good opportunity to discuss current issues with the *superintendents*, but above all to talk about everyday and personal matters. I also try to hold a Zoom call with them every two months or so, which works quite well. If the opportunity arises, I also attend *cabinet and church board meetings* (regularly in the AC CH-FR-NA) or meetings of the Board of Ordained Ministry.

The second quarter is characterized by the *annual conferences*. Thanks to the great and patient support of those responsible and the generosity of all those present, I believe we not only managed to get them off to a good start, but also took important steps towards the future. The contacts with the lay members, who I hardly ever meet otherwise, are also

valuable. One highlight was the decision at the AC Hungary-Romania to form a joint AC in the future.

Meetings at Central Conference level

At *Central Conference (CC)* level, I would like to mention the *Roma consultation* that takes place every few years, most recently at the end of March 2024 in Budapest. Under the leadership of Corinna Bütikofer from Connexio, participants from seven countries learned from their respective experiences of working with Roma communities. The meeting of leaders from the *work with children and young people* in September 2023 was also valuable. This was linked to the relaunch of this work at CC with the formation of a new working group. The international youth camp in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, next July is a great first result

Superintendents' meetings and the *Executive Committee* meetings include working sessions in which we advance the issues at stake in the CC's work, but also times of celebration and sharing experiences. We strive to make the meeting parts methodically varied and interactive. In addition to personal exchanges, this includes, for example walks, creative activities and singing. In the last two years, we have met twice physically and additionally via Zoom. In March 2024 in Vienna, we focused on the content and structure of our working groups, among other things. In September in Budapest, we decided to take a closer look at the topic of migration and develop a set of arguments that shed light on various aspects and perspectives of this theme. The themed evening at the CC will provide us with impetus for this. We also decided on the motto for the CC.

Both at these meetings and at pastors' meetings, the issue of human sexuality and how our church deals with it was a topic of discussion. However, first-hand information, a sympathetic ear and an atmosphere of discussion that allowed fears and hopes to be shared helped to shift the focus more and more to other topics and challenges. The fact that the extraordinary CC 2022 set out a forward-looking path for how we want to move forward together with our different convictions proved to be helpful. Most annual conferences and Districts formulated a statement in which they describe and record their attitude and practice. This provides clarity both internally and externally, even if these documents do not simply end discussions in some local churches or ecumenical bodies. With the exception of our church in the Czech Republic, all JKs see a further common path in the CC. Mindfulness, listening to one another and mutual appreciation are still necessary.

Encounters in Europe and worldwide

I should not forget to mention the *ecumenical encounters*. As part of annual conferences, my travels and the General Assembly of the *Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE)* in Sibiu, Romania, in September, I had the opportunity to meet a large number of ecumenical partners. Last August, the *World Methodist Council (WMC)* and the Methodist World Conference took place in Gothenburg, Sweden, with participants from 80 Methodist churches from over 130 countries. The *European Methodist Council (EMC)*, which unites ten European Methodist churches, should also be mentioned. It is very encouraging to experience connexion beyond one's own church. As the Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe, we receive, but we also have something to contribute, such as our experience in dealing with a wide variety of different social, political and religious contexts.

Finally, trips to the USA also took up some of my time: trips to the *Council of Bishops* (in November 2024, however, I sent my apologies), to *General Conference 2024* and at the end of January 2025 to a meeting of the *Standing Committee on Central Conference Matters* in Atlanta. I also experience this networking as support for my and our work here. Nevertheless, my focus for the time being is on our CC and on the pan-European level.

Challenges

Over the past two years, I have encountered various challenges. Interestingly, they are quite similar in almost all parts of our CC, albeit to varying degrees. Let me name a few:

- In many areas of our CC, the majority of our local churches are made up of people in the second half of life, and membership numbers are stagnating or declining. We are experiencing growth in the young parts of our church in Romania and Albania, for example, or where we succeed in building a church with people from an international background. The challenge is twofold: on the one hand, it consists of allowing people who have grown up in our church to participate in it in such a way that it also becomes *their* church. The other challenge is to build church *with* people who are not socialized in church. This means building friendships with them, accompanying them on *their* path to discipleship and shaping church community together with them.
- Almost everywhere in our CC, we are struggling with the *shortage of pastors*. We need to clarify what kind of pastors we need. What tasks and requirements do they have to fulfill, and what gifts and skills do they need for this? Then, how can we accompany (young) people on their journey of faith, support them in hearing God's call to (full-time) ministry and then accompany them on this journey in an encouraging and empowering way? And finally, how can we give (younger) people who are willing to take on tasks and responsibilities the freedom to shape their own lives
- One consequence of the shortage of pastors or very small local churches is an excessive time and energy burden on those responsible for leadership and staff. How can relief be provided? How can the tasks be spread over more shoulders or reduced? Are there things that need to be let go?
- Finances and properties are a major topic at all annual conferences. Resources are scarce and not everything that needs to be done can be done. What priorities need to be set and where? How can new resources be found?
- Social developments are leading to an increase in plurality in some parts of our CC. What does this mean for the church? How can we deal fruitfully with this diversity? Secularization, as a movement critical of institutions, is contributing to the church's loss of significance. In many places, it has become a marginal phenomenon and the distance between the church and the people is increasing. Points of contact are disappearing. How does the church need to change in order to overcome this distance? Where are new points of contact? How can we make God's shalom tangible now and here, where we are and live as a church - in the midst of society? We are concerned about the increasing nationalism in Europe, which we are also confronted with. What can we do to counter this? What does it mean to participate in God's mission in this context?
- We also have social issues in common, such as the topic of migration mentioned above. We experience migration differently. Some countries, for example in Western Europe, are

experiencing refugees and people looking for work coming in. Others, for example in the Balkans, are experiencing young, well-educated people in particular leaving. What can we learn from each other here? How can we support each other?

III. What is important to me

What is important to me in my ministry? What do I want to pay particular attention to?

- *Appreciate our church as a fragile vessel:* The church, including ours, is a fragile vessel (2 Corinthians 4:7). Social and political developments do not make things easy for it. It also has to contend with internal developments, circumstances and challenges such as a lack of young pastors, stagnating or declining membership figures, a lack of finances, expensive properties and other issues. When I'm out and about, I sometimes feel uncertainty and discouragement. I sometimes feel it in myself too. But the church is firmly grounded on the foundation that is the living Jesus Christ. It lives from the power of God. We are aware of its limitations. But the fact remains, and I hold fast to this: the church, with all its limitations, is God's church. It is a living creature that he needs for his mission as an instrument and foretaste of his new world, where it is aware of its mission. This is a reason for me to value it and to rejoice in it, despite everything. I give thanks for it and pray for it. I want to receive it from God's hands again and again with hope, help to shape it with my gifts and also put it back into his hands again calmly. I want to infect others with this hope and confidence.
- *Connecting across borders:* At the end of a CC meeting of leaders working with children and young people, a participant from Romania said: "It is so valuable for us to feel that there are other Methodists and to be connected with each other". Several attendees emphasized how important it is for them personally and for their young people to be and remain an international church, especially in the tense times in which we find ourselves, and to experience our diversity as an enrichment for life and faith. This commitment to our connexion across borders made me very happy! I have heard this from time to time on my travels since then. Connexion through sustainable relationships, through shared experiences, through common tasks and, of course, through faith in Jesus Christ is the cement of our community of faith and service across borders. I want to strengthen this connexion with my travels.
- *Experimenting with diverse forms of church:* For me personally, the Sunday morning service attended by the core congregation is a very important part of my faith practice and a tried and tested means of grace in our Methodist tradition too. At the same time, it is clear that social developments are changing people's habits and needs in many places, including in relation to the church. I have been concerned about this for many years and have had the opportunity to deal with it time and again in recent years. In addition to the tried and tested forms of church, we need other, new, unconventional forms. They are shaped by the respective context in our countries, but also by the milieus within our societies with which we come into contact. I am happy to help network interested people and facilitate the exchange of experiences - so that more people can be touched by God's shalom

- *Let children and young people experience that they are already part of our church today:* In conversations, I sometimes come across the statement: "Young people are the future of the church". It's true, children and young people are important for the future of the church. The leaders and employees of tomorrow are our children and young people of today. But above all, they are part of the *present*, part of our church today. They and we together are church - even now! They should experience this by having freedom in our local churches and taking responsibility for it, by meeting them as equals and shaping the church together at all levels. I encouraged the youth leaders from our CC who were present at the meeting in Budapest in September 2023 to do this. And I told them how grateful I am to them for their commitment and for helping to raise awareness of this in our church in their countries.
- *Encourage (young) people so that they develop into dedicated leaders:* Being commissioned with a full-time, part-time or even volunteer ministry in the church is a beautiful thing. I would go down the path of serving the church again. I pray that people, including young people, will hear the call from God to serve the church. And I want to approach gifted people about the possibility of getting involved in our church. They should experience us - me - as role models who encourage them to help shape our church and take on responsibility through their actions. I want to help ensure that they are given space to discover and develop their gifts and potential; that they experience how they are valued and encouraged on their journey into and in ministry, so that they develop into devoted leaders, some also into local pastors and ordained elders or deacons.

I will only briefly mention three other areas to which I would like to contribute. As a *shalom bearer*, I want to be committed to the well-being of all creatures, especially those who tend to be overlooked in our society. This also includes ensuring that everyone around our church experiences it as a safe place. This means that they experience that their dignity is protected and that violations of boundaries of all kinds have no place in the church. *Lay people and pastoral staff live the church's mission together*. I want to help create a framework in which God's spirit finds space for its work and our church is built and led in the brotherly connexion of all believers. Finally, it is important to me that *the organization, its structures and resources* actually serve *the fulfilment of the church's mission* in practice. This includes the sustainable use of available resources - also with a view to preserving creation as the basis of life for all creatures.

IV. Thank you!

Finally, my heartfelt thanks! I would like to thank you, dear superintendents, for the trust and openness with which you have welcomed me into my new role. Thank you for the time we have spent together and for your varied service, which you perform with impressive dedication and great experience. I could not do my job without you.

Thank you in the Bishop's Office, dear Urs and André. Thank you for your presence. Even if it's not every day, I love coming to the office in Zurich! Thank you for your work, your dedication and love for people and for our church. Thank you for your patience with me and for your support

I would like to thank the members of the CC office, Iris and Markus. You are valuable advisors and important supports for me, especially with regard to the preparation of this CC.

I would like to thank you, retired Bishop Patrick Streiff, for the helpful introductory period in the first half of 2023 and the trips we took together. The months of handover were very valuable for me and enabled me to get off to a good start. Thank you for your time and patience, for your many good tips and for sharing your experiences to this day

I would like to thank the members of the Executive Committee. We have the wonderful task of steering the Central Conference ship together. It is a pleasure to be on board with you and to work together!

Finally, I would like to thank all of you, here and beyond, who support our Central Conference in one way or another and enrich it with your gifts.

Together, as a community of Methodists, we are bearers of shalom. We are so in good times as well as in challenging times, in joy and sorrow, in moments full of energy and in moments of weakness. How good that we live from God's shalom and receive and fulfill our common mission from it. I thank God, who connects us with one another through his shalom, who equips and guides us through his Holy Spirit, and who encourages and protects us.

Bishop Stefan Zürcher