

CENTRAL CONFERENCE OF THE
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CENTRAL- AND SOUTHERN EUROPE
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LIBERATION TO SOLIDARITY

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3. To strengthen existing and new churches, as well as diaconal institutions and to enable them in their mission. To seriously live in the connexional structure of our Church and to strengthen thereby the identity of the UMC in Europe.

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LIBERATION TO SOLIDARITY

I. INTRODUCTION: THE BACKGROUND OF OUR SERVICE

Four years ago, at the Central Conference in Baden, we were under the impression that everything had been carefully arranged to put the leadership of the Conference into the hands of a newly elected Bishop. But it was in the same year, 1989, that major changes took place in Central- and Eastern Europe. At the same time, a new generation of Superintendents in Poland and in the former CSFR came into office. In June 1990 it was possible, for the first time since 1947, that a Bishop could visit the field of the UMC in Bulgaria. In May 1992 the Carpatho-Ukraine Churches in Ushgorod and Kamenica (by their own will and application) became part of the Provisional Annual Conference of Hungary. The changes in Europe caused and still cause the whole Methodist family-also beyond the bounds of the United Methodist Church-to continually consider it's task. In North Africa the political situation became very critical, especially because of the actions of the Allies taken in the Gulf. In Alger church buildings were attacked as symbols of occidental-Christian presence. We demand much from those who do their service with us in the face of such a background.

Altogether the last quadrennium turned out to be a real challenge, and *I want to say thanks to all those who have carried the burden with us in the light of our task.* The fact that God strengthened me to cope with and to grow under such conditions and in the manifold tasks of our area fills my heart with great thankfulness.

The theme of this Central Conference, "Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom", traces an unbroken line through this Bishops report. In our European situation, the newly-won freedom was welcomed. However, it seems to be endangered again to-day in many ways and we have to change the question: "Freedom from ...?" into "Freedom to...?" In the life of our area, where one has to notice the tension between autonomy and connexion, the title was created: "Liberation to solidarity."

A changing Europe

The political and social realities have radically changed in a very short period. The changes concern the East and the West.

For the East the outcome is dramatical. We, as the United Methodist Church, experience this outcome out of the perspective of every day life. The political events lead to the questions, whether we can be recognized as an internationally structured church and adapt to various national constitutions, and whether we can get church buildings back, which were once taken from us. In the present "economical winter" churches share the experience of limits made by ordinary citizens: One can hardly pay for heating and keeping of church rooms, and the mobility of preachers is limited because of

any more. At least three generations have been brought up in a totalitarian system and this has its effects on human relations. Congregations and Conferences have to struggle to learn a new and open way of communication. On the level of society the fact of being set free from a totalitarian and violent government caused a search of the former nations, religions and confessions for their own identity. Very often the process continues from exactly where it was interrupted by the totalitarian powers. This is the context of the cruel and not understandable development in former Yugoslavia and of the division of Czechoslovakia. What is hardly mentioned is the fact, that on every level, even in the field of religion, there is inconsiderate taking over of the East by Western powers. This concerns not only the tensions between economically strong and weak. Experience will show whether behind all this there is the struggling for power and predominance of the West in Europe.

Western Europeans have a relatively high standard of food supply, medical care and social security. On the other hand they have to admit that they do not have the grip on "the new poverty" in the cities and on other negative social and economical tendencies. Even Methodist churches have only in a very limited way dealt with victims of such negative tendencies.

The way leading towards a strong European community of the Western nations is rooted in economical interests. But there are other impulses and motivations, which during a process of many years, have been aimed at the same goal. Since 1949 the European Council endeavours to upkeep the values of the constitutional state, human rights and constituted rights like the freedom of religion. The West European block, concerned about its own security, established in 1975 together with the USA, Canada and the rulers of Central and Eastern Europe the "Conference of Security and Co-operation in Europe. The effect of the final document in Helsinki was of great importance for an opening between East and West.

Freedom can be a lethal threat

This is how the Polish poet Andrzej Szczypiorski described the situation in October 1991. The step to democracy and *freiheit* in Eastern countries did not bring about a better situation for their lives,- on the contrary. What Tolstoy mentioned 90 years ago in his Correspondence became reality: "Poverty is the most cruel form of bondage", or as the philosopher M. Weber stated: "The free market does not know brotherhood." The confrontation of the post-totalitarian reality with visions of freedom, which fascinated people until a few years ago, seems to be more of a hinderance than a help. The governments are not able to meet the demands, the masses of people are suffering. There are nostalgic glances back into the past here and there. It would be a mistake to think that the West has the solutions and that it is only necessary to put them into practise in the East. Without an essential rethinking in all parts of Europe, there will be no solution. In the meanwhile fears are growing in Alger, Europe might forget the problems of Maghreb because it concentrates so much on its own problems. Europe needs a liberation to solidarity.

Moving towards a multicultural society

Already in the summer of 1989, at the time of the great exodus from the GDR, first to Hungary and then to Austria, the small Methodist Church in Hungary cared for people in refugee camps. In the city of Basle one of our chapels became a meeting and educational centre for asylum seekers. The Provisional Annual Conference in Austria decided in 1992 that in every Church building there should be, as far as possible, accommodation for at least one refugee family from former Yugoslavia. We have sent humanitarian help for refugees to Macedonia and Vojvodina last winter. In Vienna and Graz through the openness of the people to guest workers and employees of international organisations multicultural churches have come into being. They are models for future UMC churches throughout Europe. Our churches in Budapest, Strasbourg and Bern, just to quote examples, have offered rooms for work with Chinese and Cambodian people. Such openness and help is a mutual witness to a steadily growing resistance against the new mass migration from the East and from the Third World countries. Such a witness is in the spirit of the Gospel. The church has to oppose the powers of hate of foreigners, racism, human contempt and of a nationalism that discriminates ethnic and religious minorities. It may not join in the building of walls which are erected by the richer nations against the poorer ones, very much like the selfish example of the Romans, when they built the „Limes“.

On the way to a multicultural society in a post-socialist Europe we are challenged to come to terms, in an ecumenical and brotherly manner, with the so-called national churches. They cannot do otherwise than play their role in an emancipatory nationalism. Under emancipatory nationalism is meant all the powers of national tradition, language, culture and religion, which have been newly formed as a countereffect to the long years of repression and outlevelling under communist rule. We must help these churches to learn to differentiate clearly between emancipatory and repressive nationalism. The national churches have to define anew their role in these processes. It is important not only to keep nationalism on a lead, out of consideration of the Christian understanding of freedom, but also to work out the differences between nation and society. Thus it will be made possible to morally support the development of a democratic society, a society which emphasizes the equality of all citizens in its law and which protects its minorities.

For example: If the Roman Catholic Church in Poland, which played an important part in the overcoming of communism, was to keep nationalists on the lead and define a new role for herself, she would have to fear a loss of her authority and influence. This is the reason, why a change of direction in these churches is like a borderline walk. On the way to a multicultural society ecumenical solidarity is needed.

The church in a pluralistic society

For Algeria, Bulgaria, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Macedonia, Poland, the Slovakian Republic, Czech Republic and Hungary one would have to write a history with the title „Church in Socialism“. Each country would

to write a history with the title „Church in Socialism“. Each country would have its own incomparable memories. This past, which has made significant impressions on human beings, is so close to us, that it will influence our way in the future, whether we like it or not. It shall not hinder us to fulfil our mission, which is to spread the message of God's liberating grace to all people, without regard to their status.

Eberhard Jüngel, a professor of Theology from Tübingen, made the important statement that “the opposite of a church in socialism was not, as often suggested, a church in capitalism but a church in a pluralistic society“. We may understand Pluralism as an arrangement of society in which an attempt is made in a democratic manner to limit the selfishness of the strong and the weak to make it bearable. Pluralism is an experiment in practical life, to define the limits of personal and group freedom as the limits of other persons or groups. In principle the aim of a pluralistic society is freedom of its members. There is a certain affinity between the message of freedom of the church and the pluralistic society, although the church can never identify itself with this kind of society. The Christian understanding of freedom is deeper than the understanding of freedom in the pluralistic society of concurrence and simple limitation of the ever-existent selfishness as *modus vivendi*. Only the one who has received forgiveness of sin and can forgive is really a free person in the sense of the Gospel. This is the freedom that we may express as a church in a pluralistic society, not by insisting on our rights and our freedom, but by being prepared to serve other people. I think there is a lot to do amongst ourselves on both the level of Conference and local Churches.

II. KERYGMA: THE MESSAGE OF LIBERATION

In the introduction I tried to show the fields and the background of our common service. I am aware of the fact that it was not easy for those amongst us, who do not speak German, to follow this concentrated analysis. But now you have the text in your hands and you may work with it.

If we, as the United Methodist Church in this Central Conference, want to fulfil our mission task together then we need to achieve a common consent. This consent concerns where we stand and what our mission task is today and what it will be tomorrow. Every generation has to define this mission anew in its own and very special time and to put it into practice.

Under our theme „Liberation to Solidarity“ we want to face our mission.

The message of God's saving grace

If we ask what the contents of Methodist teaching and preaching are, we find the gift of our Wesleyan heritage,- the biblical teaching of grace. The centre of our preaching is and always will be the message of God's saving grace. Its centre is the liberating work of God in Jesus Christ, who turns towards men, and the power of freedom which arises from this. We have not even experienced what this message can lead to in a society of concurrence and performance and the experience of many shortcomings. We have received this message as a gift and we witness it and celebrate it in our services and we teach it to the newly-converted and to our children (Celebration and

This message of God's saving and liberating grace may be lived and preached in the challenges of our world.

The Kingdom of God perspective

In a discussion about the contribution of the Protestant Churches to a future Europe, the original principles of reformation, - sola scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia- were mentioned to be central. When the participants continued to consider this they spoke about justification by faith and about the new, healed and free relation to God, based on the evangelical freedom of the individual. The theologian Jan Milic Lochman called out: "But where is the perspective of the Kingdom of God?"

In the Gospel Jesus is proclaimed as preaching the kingdom of God: "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1. 15). Liberation is not a goal in itself, it is direction towards the kingdom of God. Where we propagate only individualistic healing, health, redemption, we become betrayers of the Gospel and the Church. The mystery of the Church lies in its relation to the kingdom of God. The Church is called to share the redemption of Jesus Christ in this torn world, full of suffering and death. Church always lives in tension between the present kingdom and the kingdom which is to come. Any time she tries to stop to live in such tension she starts to betray God and his work of salvation for this world, which he dearly loves. It is a pity that many concepts of evangelisation and mission in Europe today forget about this perspective. They proclaim in a short-sighted manner healing and health in our present time.

Discovery and experience of liberation

But the kingdom of God is already in our midst. In the tradition of Pietism and of Methodism the personal experience of liberation played therefore an important role. John Wesley considered only those to be true Christians who had experienced the grace of God in their own life. The Methodist tradition developed ways to pass on personal experience: In small groups (classes), in witness before the whole congregation at love feasts etc. In such an exchange of experience it was possible to make necessary corrections. Because of this lack of experience in the traditional Churches on the one hand and because of the present climate in society, which encourages success and high expectations on the other hand, charismatic and neo-pentecostal groups are profiting. There is a desire for symbolic action like baptism, ceremonies of blessing, anabaptism with lots of water, etc. They show that we have to take up the challenge of consciously dealing with the desire for personal Christian experience. It is a characteristic of Methodist moderation to always ask for our common understanding of the Gospel. Personal experience must find proof in the biblical revelation, in the experience of our fathers and mothers (tradition) and in reason, which is God's gift to us.

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If we get lost, individually or as a church, in a form of Christian life which is constantly trying to produce experiences, we run away from the Kingdom of God perspective and its tension between "here and now" and "not yet". Dietrich Bonhoeffer described this tension for himself and his time: "To be a Christian can mean only two things today -to pray and to do the deeds of righteousness."

Evangelisation:

**The message of God's saving grace
To be truthful in preaching and life**

Traditional church evangelisation, spontaneous setting up of new churches, tent mission, charismatic renewals with a tendency to personal evangelisation, evangelisation by small groups and occasional mass evangelisations-our activities are like a carpet with many patches. And the ideas, the possibilities and the limits of evangelisation differ depending on the cultural background.. We had to learn in our area, that mission and evangelisation had to be different according to context. Individual evangelists or evangelistic groups which want to implant their concepts and ready-made messages into another culture are lacking love, moreover they work in contradiction to the spirit of Jesus Christ. This should not be the way of Methodists!

Fastgrowing, new congregations have a tendency to autonomy as well as to division. Very often theologically competent leaders are lacking to overcome such situations. The most helpful concept of evangelism seems to be the way of building up personal relationships.

Evangelisation ist here and there a question of to be or not to be for our church. But evangelisation must not only be seen from this perspective. There is need for a new evangelisation of Europe. Europe needs orientation. We are called as churches to teach people the ethical standards which are necessary for the proper use of freedom. It is very important to be well aware of the secular human person of today and to pick up the challenge of the overall crisis of Europe. We have to learn to talk with others about faith and to struggle with those who are searching to find answers about the urgent question of life. We do not want to help people to hide into a world of religious phantoms, but to work together for liberty to solidarity.

This will only happen if churches, and this means all of us, preach the message of God's saving grace truthfully and live accordingly.

III. DIAKONIA: LIBERATED TO SOLIDARITY

The centre of Methodist piety is the belief that preaching and practice of faith, kerygma and diakonia, belong together. But some Methodists and whole congregations could not withstand the main danger of Protestantism, which emphasizes that kerygma is mainly found in preaching. Church was seen as the place where you went to hear sermons. That happened not only under the pressure of totalitarian governments. Preaching should never be a substitute for practical imitation of Christ.

To take on diaconal responsibility

The church, those people liberated to solidarity by Christ, puts the element of diakonia, namely serving, into its centre. She helps men and women to overcome the spirit of self-fulfilment. The individualistic understanding of "having to progress" even if others have to carry the costs, needs to be set right according to the biblical instruction: "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant" (Matthew 20, 26). The Annual Conferences have started to reorganize their social institutions which have been abandoned in the communist areas. It is important during the time of structuring these institutions, not to misunderstand, as it happened often in East and West, that diaconal responsibility was transferred from the individual to a group. To help people in need is first of all a question of asking the individual to love his or her neighbour. This does not question the diaconal institutions as such. They do what one person alone would not be able to do on a long-term basis. There is a need of common support for the existing and newly-founded social institutions of the church.

Co-operation in the forming of ethical principles

In the last 40 years there was always a need for intuition, if we worked on the social principles, on ethical principles or on human rights in our area. Most of the texts we published were adapted to the political and social situation of the country. In the structuring of a new and hopefully democratic and pluralistic Europe, we have to learn first amongst ourselves to talk and debate on social principles and other issues like individual, and social-ethical principles. With debating I mean a process that brings us together so that we may again speak with one voice.

The issue of peace has become a new issue because of the national conflicts in Europe. The call to use violence to put an end to violence has gained much ground, but it should not throw us back behind the knowledge we have, that violence and war are not a means of peace. In our Central Conference it is time for another discussion about "Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation".

The migration in Europe and from North Africa to Europe and the tendency to build new borders and even towards a hate of foreigners should not only be seen as a task for diaconal action. It is also a challenge to be active in the sector of social politics. There is not only a need for help for the victims but also a need for a radical prophetic criticism.

We will hardly be able to play a part in the forming of ethical principles in a new Europe, if we cannot enable our local churches to be active in these issues, by teaching and living according to the Gospel. At a pastors' retreat I made a daring statement that every UMC Church in Europe, that does not change into a multicultural church or that does not take up a new social diaconal task (however small or big it might be), within the next five years has to ask itself whether it is still a Methodist Church.

About the protection of the weak in a pluralistic society

The Church is challenged, by the problem of growing poverty in East and West, growing unemployment, the problems of social and psychological

losers, the needs of people who have Aids and the needs of drug addicts, the unbelievable difference in health standards between the rich and the poor areas of our Conference area, by children who grow up in irresponsible ecological surroundings, by people who were disabled by war, discriminated and raped women, by unaccepted ethnical groups, refugees and asylum seekers... they are all challenging the church to put the proclamation of God's saving grace into practise in everyday life. This means to stand up for the weak, to care for them but not to make them objects of our desire to help others. Followers of Christ who are liberated to solidarity will find their field of work right in front of the door of their own house and church. They have been liberated to work together with all people of good will.

IV. KOINONIA: FREEDOM – DIVERSITY – CONNEXIO

Where church exists according to the Gospel, kerygma, diaconia and koinonia are parts of the same mission. Koinonia (fellowship) is the touchstone of liberation to solidarity.

Church as a complementary - fellowship in this world

Christians have become a minority in modern society. If they attempt to deal with the agenda of this world they usually discover that it is much too demanding. But they may be witnesses as complementary fellowship of the liberating grace of God. This means, that they must not stay in the conformity that is expected from them by the powers of society. They will say: "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5, 29). They may be salt, light and yeast. These biblical pictures do not invite us to look away from this world. They invite us to live so that others may ask us: Why do you live like you are living? Or even: Why can you show your weaknesses so openly? Or: You welcome people and accept them as they are. If I am with you I can breathe again. Why is that so?

Mission and Ecumenism

The manifold forms and expressions of faith and the different concepts of mission and evangelisation may be seen as enriching. But one has to admit, that the different styles of piety are causing difficulty already within the Methodist family. It would be worthwhile to write a history of our Conference area based on this. But how much strength, love and imagination is necessary to cope with the variety of the different denominations. Liberation to solidarity is put to its major test. How can the churches give a clear witness in a world of particularity and enmity, if they themselves as minorities in our societies are not united? If we want to continue a good Methodist tradition in the countries of our area, than we must learn anew to live our mission not in defining it against others, but as partners together with them. We may express this patiently to the national churches, who judge our mission and the mission of their sister churches as making proselytes. Wherever it is possible we shall work together with them in local and national Councils of Christian Churches.

Mission in Europe: Partnership of local churches / sharing of resources

Solidarity is a living reality amongst Methodists. Due to the initiative of the Central Conference of Central- and Southern Europe the new European Council of the UMC has set up a Fund of solidarity. This Fund is only for the support of projects which have found agreement by an Annual Conference. Therefore the Annual Conferences have to make priorities. The Fund receives its support from donators. It can help under many burdens, but it cannot be an answer to every possible wish. The donators themselves choose the projects they want to contribute to, from the project list and by this mark the areas of main effort.

After the opening of borders in Europe we initiated a project called "Church-partnership". Similar projects had already existed amongst youth groups for a longer period. Where people are open to each other and make situations transparent, such partnership enriches in the sense that both sides may be give and gain. Where such a partnership is one-sided, and limited to financial help, advice and educational help, it will be a burden after a shorter or longer period. The Annual Conferences must be able to overlook and co-ordinate such partnerships otherwise they will cause envy and suspiciousness.

The Funds „Help for the Geneva area“ which is kept in the Bishop's office, the support by the Advanced Special (Project support by the Board of global ministries) and Humanitarian Help by the UMCOR (United Methodist Church Organized Relief), are signs of living solidarity in the sharing of resources in the Methodist family.

Mission worldwide: Solidarity in Life

It is a positive sign that the Annual Conferences in the former socialist countries, after the opening of the borders, started to be interested in mission in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. In today's situation the exchange of information about their partner-churches in the Third World has become more important than financial support. But we know that there was a special blessing with the penny of the widow, who gave all her living (Mark 12, 49). Even countries with currencies that are not yet convertible have found ways, with lots of imagination, how to support their partner-churches in the Third World. At present such an exchange of information may be arranged by the Mission Secretaries Office of the Annual Conference of Switzerland and France in Zurich. This is at least an offer. The future may be that the Annual Conferences elect their own mission secretaries.

Interest for information about the changes in Central and East Europe has been expressed by Latin Americans. The question is raised again and again whether Liberation Theology may not offer an answer for all the situations where hope seems to be far off. I believe we are not yet ready or able in some of our Annual Conferences, to have such an open discussion.

The Central Conference as an expression of our connexion

"Connexio" is the name John Wesley gave to the Methodist movement, which spread out from England, Wales, Ireland and Scotland over the Channel Islands to America. The Conference became the living and structural expression of this connectional idea. The understanding of connectionalism

wa that mission was always planned together and handled with responsibility. The movement should not lead to a narrow, short-sighted congregationalism, or be under the burden of the old hierarchial structure of the Church of England. It was due to the special charakter of the Methodist movement and a certain optimism out of the grace of God, that it overcame the old parish system of the Church of England and that it was a foundation for a fellowship of solidarity and service which bridged the gap between regions, nations, poor and rich, men and women. This is how the concept of „connexio“ found its way into the “Oxford English Dictionary“. There it says under connectionalism: “The system of the Methodist connection in theory and practise.”

What does it mean today if we, as a Central Conference, are to take seriously the system of the connexio?

It seems important to keep in mind, that historically the Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe was a fellowship of solidarity of minority churches in challenge and need. The work of this Central Conference was strongly influenced by the political division of East and West. This was a stabilizing factor as well. This Central Conference made it possible to live and experience connexio crossing the borders of the different political and economical systems. Will this fellowship of solidarity continue as it has been in the perspective of a new Europe?

Such are the questions that were asked at the Executive meetings of the Central Conference. These questions were raised with representatives of the other Central Conferences. They led to the decision, that this Central Conference should be continued in its present borders perhaps on a long term basis. After the changes had taken place I invited the superintendents to a meeting in Zurich. The leading people within the area have in the meanwhile asked for regular meetings. This is the foundation for a new cabinet for the whole Central Conference. It shall be a help to the superintendents in questions of ministerial offices, annual Conferences, priorities in our common mission, problems concerning theological education, ecumenical relationships etc. And it shall be a help for the Bishop's office under the new circumstances. I would like this cabinet to meet twice every year, though I see that this will stress the operational budget of the Central Conference.

There are well-known reasons why the work of the Central Conference was limited mainly to the questions of theology and office and the work on our discipline, at least when one looks at the final decisions made. But it has already become quite clear that the relatively small Annual Conferences need a place for consultation for the many questions of mission, ethical principles and challenges in society, how to deal with differences in piety and Methodist identity. I feel that we are not yet ready and able in all of our Annual Conferences to start such an open theological dialogue. The future will show how we may find common and obligatory answers for the different cultural contexts we live in.

Economically, the Annual Conferences are still dependent on help from outside. Solidarity in help shall not hinder Annual Conferences to become self-supporting Conferences, whenever it is possible, so that they may be financially independent. It will be an immediate task to develop a new understanding of responsible church membership.

The opening of the borders has caused some of our fellow workers, groups and congregations to decide to neglect the connectional structures and tried to set up their own lucrative contacts. This leads to the destruction of soli-

darity within the country, to envy and suspicion. The Central Conference has to help to make information and co-ordination transparent and to set guidelines.

In national conflicts the connexio helped the churches to stay with one another, which may be seen in former Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. In former Yugoslavia the church constitutions for the state recognition in the new republics are not yet worked out. In Prague a reasonable and good plan was worked out during an additional Annual Conference, to set up two administrative districts and to adapt them to the new situation.

The Executive of the Central Conference, as well as the new cabinet of the Central Conference, will have to deal with the question how we can live in the connexio under the new circumstances.

One can theoretically deal with the question of identity of the church. But it may well be seen in the way how people share with each other and how they try to reach out to the common goals. The question of connexio in our Central Conference finds its answer in the way we express our mission as a church. This is our touchstone for our being liberated to solidarity.

Our premises for working together in the connexio are very different, because of language and culture and the history we have lived in. Our Bulgarian brothers and sisters are present for the first time at this Central Conference. Therefore I may try to concentrate our common aims, like I have expressed them in this Bishop's letter, under three topics:

V: AIMS OF SERVICE OF THE UMC IN CENTRAL- AND SOUTHERN EUROPE

1. To preach the Gospel of God's saving grace and to live accordingly, thus enabling our fellow men to find and follow the example of Jesus and to help them to experience liberation to solidarity.

2. To take on diaconal responsibility for the poor and the suffering in our society and to work for a just, free and peaceful co-existence in a pluralistic society in a multicultural Europe.

3. To strengthen existing and new churches, as well as diaconal institutions and to enable them in their mission. To seriously live in the connexional structure of our Church and to strengthen thereby the identity of the UMC in Europe.

To keep up ecumenical relations as a fellowship in solidarity in the world for the world.

In thankfulness for the experience of the redeeming and helping presence of God's Spirit in our common history and his liberating power on our common way into the future.

Bishop Heinrich Bolleter