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Postfach 2239, CH-8026 Zürich

United Methodist Church  
Bishop Heinrich Bolleter

A Joyful Response to the Gospel – Relating to Life and the Heart of People

Outlines of a Minority Church

Original Text: German

## Introduction

A joyful response to the Gospel is the very beginning of the church. It is by the grace of God that this joy is renewed day by day. It is through this joyful response to the Gospel that we are able to relate to life and the heart of people. Is this the case for our minority church in central and southern Europe? In the church and world there are all too many people who spoil the pleasures of others; but our joy in the Gospel should not be taken from us. If we lose joy, the law has gained dominion over grace in us.

This Episcopal Address, addressing the seven Annual Conferences bound together in our Central Conference, wants to show that our lives, our fellowship and our service are all sustained by this joy. If we must state a reason for remaining together, then the answer does not lie in our good experiences in the past, or the connectional office of the Bishop or even in the financial and structural dependencies. It is first and foremost our joy in the Gospel. This is enough!

When I prepared this Address, I would have liked to address each of the seven Annual Conferences, because they all have a different context and history. We are not only concerned here with diversity of context and historical experience. Things become more complicated. How we see the past, the present and the future differs greatly, depending on where we come from and where we live. St. Augustin<sup>1</sup>, the Church Father, wrote about the "presence of the past, the presence of the present and the presence of the future". Memory, perspectives and expectation are very diverse in the context of our annual conferences. It is the task of the Standing Committees of the Central Conference, the Executive and the meetings of the Central Conference to venture on the continuing process, to listen to one another and to express ourselves so - as the Lord of the Church expects from us - that we may understand one another.

John was called by the Lord to write to each of the seven churches in Asia. He knew each church well and was able to find the right words of admonition and encouragement.

The Lord of the Church expects us to meet and to understand one another. This is the reason why the letters to the seven churches have been passed on in the New Testament. We have discovered that many of the strengths and weaknesses of the Christians in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea are present in ourselves.

On this occasion of the Central Conference we may see how differently we are influenced by our contexts and experiences in history in central and southern Europe. However, our own strengths and weaknesses will always be reflected in our Methodist brothers and sisters in other countries of our area. In the presence of the Lord of the church, we shape his church together - and only

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<sup>1</sup> St. Augustin, Confessions, Book 11, XX, 26

uncircumcision, neither nationality nor race, neither rich nor poor, there is just faith working through love.<sup>2</sup>

I repeat: It is our common and joyful response to the Gospel that moves us and binds us together. Joy in the Gospel is the source of energy for our service. One of our students in the Graz /Waiern Study programme said to me at the end of his studies, " During my course my joy in the Gospel was deepened. I am looking forward to preaching the Gospel and also to continue my studies. John Wesley always asked his preachers two basic questions, concerning their preaching: "What do we teach (preach)?" and "How do we teach (preach)?"

A joyful response to the Gospel drives us in both directions. First of all, to hear and study the Gospel, so that we may be set free and that our faith and life be formed by it. Secondly, to consider the context and the listener, and the reception of the sermon.

I think the first question "What do we teach?" has today been buried by the second question "How do we teach?" When we preach the Gospel, we have to keep the balance between giving and receiving.

I sometimes get the impression, when I visit various church services, that ten percent of the preparation time is invested in "What do we teach?" and ninety percent in "How do we teach?" The performance has become more important than the contents.

Our preaching is so strongly incultured, creating the impression that the concern for culture is greater than for the Gospel. This makes the preaching very provincial. Symbolic actions can be very meaningful for some and completely irrelevant for others. In a Macedonian church, people were invited to take a stone from a basket and to put it at the foot of the cross. This was meant to be a symbol for laying down the burden of guilt. Hardly anybody responded to the invitation. Stones are used to build or to stone people. Why on earth should anybody carry them into church and put them at the foot of the cross? The relation between the Gospel and the cultural context is certainly a dynamic one. Therefore it is important that our main motivation continues to be the joy in the Gospel. It is true to say: If you first search for the "What" the "How" will come to you.

A joyful response to the Gospel led and leads in Methodism to awakening. Without awakening many Methodists feel miserable. They ask themselves continuously: "How" can we preach, sing, play music, evangelise and contribute to church growth more effectively? However, they rarely ask themselves about their own joy in the Gospel and "What" they should preach today.

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<sup>2</sup> Galatians 5,6

Methodism is grace put into practice (Gelebte Gnade). Grace is received, not to be kept, but to be passed on. Shortly before he died, John Wesley preached on "The Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity"<sup>3</sup>. He mentioned the importance of good teaching and discipline and thirdly and most important the gift of "passing on". Methodists had become keepers of grace. They were no longer capable of sharing and "passing on". They tried to be Christians without passing the gift of grace on.

In our market orientated society today there is nothing given away. If people are kind, then it is to themselves; If people do good, then it is also to themselves. In such a context, practiced grace and the Methodist tradition of "Give as much as you can" appear to be a striking and valuable witness to the world.

Everything is based on the joy of those set free by the Gospel.

## **A joyful response to the Gospel...**

### **A joyful response to the Gospel ... taking on the mission**

Our primary task is to communicate the Gospel. This is no easy task in Europe, where our society has declared all things religious or Christian as taboo, or just of private interest. Is the joy in the Gospel all that is needed to fulfil the mission? Is it not necessary to determine more exactly what the contents are of what we are passing on? Are we not in danger of being swamped by individualism? Do we not need to embed individual faith into the fellowship of others who confess and believe? Is it not necessary to insert the Gospel into decisive social and political positions (cracks) in our society? The new church communities that have been formed in our Central Conference can be attributed to the witness of single people. These people have received the love of God through Jesus Christ as a foundation for their lives and invite others to do the same. We are concerned about the communication of the Gospel of the love of God, who wants to help all people. This is enough for the beginning. It takes a year or two before the process sets in to embed the individual faith into a fellowship of others who believe and into our society. It is important that this fact is considered and that the lay missionaries either receive further education and training or are relieved by a trained minister at the most after three years. This requires a lot of flexibility.

When we talk about the church in crisis – and sometimes we talk ourselves into it – then we refer more often than not to the structures. I am convinced that if

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<sup>3</sup> Sermon 122, "Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity", Works 4:86-96

we are in a crisis, then it is essentially a crisis in orientation and in the second place a crisis in structures. The most important processes of clarification must be dealt with in the field of theology, in the transportation of the Gospel into our everyday lives, and not in the field of management. I repeat the question: Is the joy in the Gospel all that is needed to fulfil the mission? My answer is: Joy in the Gospel enables us to concentrate on essentials and be flexible in important issues. Similarly, joy in the Gospel protects us from the danger of presenting ourselves and give priority to the concerns of Christ.

I would like to honour now a fragment of Methodist theology. Dr. Theophil Spörri worked from 1939 until his death in 1955 on three volumes of Christian doctrine with the title, "Mankind and the Good News"<sup>4</sup>. This doctrine begins with the human existence and all of its misery and incomprehensibility and leads on to the good news of the help of God through Jesus Christ. At present, we are tired of constant analyses pertaining to our condition. I would like to deliberately reverse his approach and say: the Good News and mankind! The contents of the Gospel must be repositioned in the centre of our work and service.

### **A joyful response to the Gospel ... to shape and form our churches**

It is a very important task that we have to shape our life together in the church. The present form that the church has was not imposed upon us – it is the result of our own development. We alone are responsible for it.

The typical Methodist love-feast can be found in our liturgy. It arose out of the occasion of giving witness and singing together. Christian experience, intercessory prayer and unconstrained blessings were also a part of this. Additionally, there are the "class meetings" – they were a place of fellowship in the context of prayer. This would be the place for confession, but also for admonition and forgiveness. Thirdly, I would like to specify the Methodist conferences. Only too often have they taken on today the form of business meetings and are no longer a place to share and speak about oneself, to have theological discussions, to consider the social concerns and the mission that we have been set. In an open and committed community we are vulnerable, but we can still encourage others.

We are responsible for shaping and forming our churches.

The possibility of meetings in small groups, as well as the worship service as an expression of church life are of central importance. The church community gathers together those who are on the way. There are people of faith and people who are seeking. This makes fellowship possible. Church is a fellowship of

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<sup>4</sup> Lic.theol Theophil Spörri: "Mankind and the Good News" Christliche Glaubenslehre Band I-II 720 Pages. Frankfurt and Zürich 1956

people who teach and learn, of people looking for help and people who serve, people who suffer and people who comfort.

Many churches try to open themselves for people who are strangers to church life by starting new church services. Part of it is offering friendly opportunities to families and being open to different styles of music in the church service. Young people have a tendency to attend services with a touch of their youth subculture. It is not easy for a church to hold the balance, to be open to the youth without losing older members. This is the balance the church has to keep, to fulfil its mission by risking its identity, to be on the way with others and at the same time keep its tradition.

In a meeting of all of the churches of Wesleyan tradition in the Ukraine, we experienced how different churches deal with the new realities. Our churches in the Carpath-Ukraine found it difficult to be flexible. In Soviet times they were under the leadership of one family and now seem to find it extremely difficult to grow out of this. The opposite is the church in Odessa, which was founded in the times of changes. It consists of many willing and voluntary members and is full of potential to develop.

Where we shape our fellowship out of joy in the Gospel we do not have to hold on to old ways and habits. We will have room for new ideas and new helpers. They are not a threat to us and we should not turn them down.

### **A joyful response to the Gospel ... willing to change**

In the Annual Conference of Switzerland and France many church communities worked on an identification model. We went through a process of consultation, developed the primary tasks and the possibilities to reach out to others. Such an identification model can help to find a common way in pluralistic times. At least the development of such an identification model is seen as a move into the future.

The General Conference as well would like us to be in a process of change. It is a pity that this takes place mainly by changing the discipline. The necessary reception is difficult. We work at very different speeds, when we deal with changes in our discipline. The Church Discipline exists as a German text. Within the last ten years, it has been translated into eight further languages. Others have adapted the discipline according to their state laws and cultural contexts. Now that we have come so far, we shall with our limited resources start all over again with many important parts of the discipline.

This is a big burden. We did not even have the time to discuss the new church offices and ordinations and of church membership. Therefore we do not have to hesitate to postpone the decision to the Central Conference in 2004.

Meanwhile the Judicial Council has made a decision concerning the adaption rights of the Central Conferences. The decision was turned back to the Judicial

Council by the Bishops within the limit of 90 days for further consideration because the adaption rights were seen as much too rigid. Our present discipline would not be according to church law. In general, one can say that the new deacon fits well into different practical situations of our church.

### **A joyful response to the Gospel ... to guarantee training and further education**

In our conferences where it was not possible to train the next generation, we must now intensify our efforts and train people for new leadership. It is an asset to our identity. A new concept of leadership is needed. The churches must depart from old concepts of church and society and find a leadership style of partnership und participation. For such partnership respect, responsibility and the courage to take certain risks is required.

We have chosen the training-centres carefully. If we have too many choices for training we loose our connection through too many influences. The training centres accepted by our Central Conference for the seven Annual Conferences are: The Theological Seminary in Reutlingen FRG, the Centre Méthodist de Formation Théologique in Lausanne CH; for the slavic speaking area: the Theological Seminary in Warsaw PL, the Theological Study Programme in Graz/Waiern A, the Faculty in Banska Bistrica SK. The three training centres last mentioned, together with the local pastor study programmes in Bulgaria and Macedonia receive financial aid from General Conference through the Board of Higher Education and Ministry for this quadrennium.

The numbers of students entering ministry is rising within the former socialist countries. In the western countries these numbers are declining.

The developments in the fields of human resources and in educating the next generations are difficult problems to solve. In countries where the number of people prepared to serve the church is growing we do not have the financial resources, and in countries which have the finances there are no people.

We do need new models for our service. Around 200 pastoral members in our conferences cannot be financed through the income of the local churches. The newly budgeted donation fund for wages in central Europe and in the Balkan countries has reached SFR 750.000,— annually. The number of churches is continuing to grow and the need to adjust the wages to the rise in the cost of living in the different countries has reached a point which can hardly be coped with anymore. This is why we need lay and voluntary workers. We are a step ahead of the UN with the "Year of voluntary work". Voluntary work is a long-surviving Methodist theme. It is necessary to think and speak about it. We do

our work in the growing churches with many fully employed lay people. But we should encourage voluntary work.

### **A joyful response to the Gospel ... in ecumenical openness**

Within the ecumenical context we believe that a joyful response to the Gospel should influence our fellowship. Only in such a way may we overcome the lethargy which presently befalls many of our full time employees - especially of the younger generation -, when they hear the word "ecumenical". Churches do not have to be more unified, but we need to discover our common joy in the Gospel. In some areas we come closer to historical Lutheran or Reformed Churches. A year ago Bishop Zdzislaw Tranda of the small Reformed Church of Poland spoke in his report of a possible union of Lutherans, Reformed and Methodists. He feels that a unified protestant church in Poland has better chances. At least it has become a habit to invite the bishops of other Protestant Churches to Annual Conferences.

I do not want to speak about the "ecumenical labyrinth"<sup>5</sup> but show my own perspective. Ecumenical relationships can be compared to Greek Islands. When the forest is cut down it is very difficult to get it growing again. Orthodox Churches consider the Methodist and Roman Catholic Church as having made Proselytes; we try together with the Catholic church to plant young trees for a new ecumenical forest wherever it is possible. The plants can be tended by ceasing to accuse or to complain about one another. The Charta Oecumenica was introduced by the Conference of European Churches for this very reason. The first draft represented very much the defensive position of the bigger churches. A new text of the Charta Oecumenica, Guidelines for growing cooperation between the churches in Europe, was accepted at the meeting of the Joint Committee of the Conference of European Churches (CEC) and the Council of the Conference of European Bishops of the Roman Catholic Church (CCEE) , 26–29 January 2001 in Porto/ Portugal. The Text will be signed on Sunday April 22, 2001 in Strassburg, by the presidents of CEC and CCEE.<sup>6</sup>

The text was made after a period of consultation in the years 1999 and 2000 by the member churches of CEC und the Bishop's Conferences of CCEE. It describes major ecumenical tasks which lead to a number of guidelines and commitments. The United Methodist Church contributed and made its comments on the text. The impact of the Charta Oecumenica depends on the commitment of the Bishop's Conferences of CCEE and the member churches of CEC: They are invited to receive the text together with their ecumenical partners in their special local situation.

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<sup>5</sup> Reinhard Frieling in Evangelische Kommentare Nr.8/98 p.452

<sup>6</sup> emk news 2.2.2001



The Vatican document "Dominus Jesus" has caused sadness amongst many Christians. There is little hope that a deeper study of this text will bring us closer, because mutual acceptance is not the result but the premise for the ecumenical dialogue. However this document has placed the Declaration on Justification and it's signing in Augsburg in the shadow.

This year, all Christian traditions celebrate Easter on the same day. We should take this as a chance to greet our ecumenical partners, - not only where we experience tensions.

### **Relating to life and the heart of people ... in pastoral care**

Pastoral care is crucial for church development and leadership. There is a big gap in our churches between the needs and what we can offer. In the west we emphasize the value of pastoral theology. In the everyday life of the church it is not actively carried out. Anybody who has a problem shall come forward on his or her own accord. If specific pastoral problems appear people are soon sent to advisers outside the church. The pastor sees him or herself more as a general leader and not competent for specific pastoral questions.

In the former socialist countries the students were not prepared sufficiently for this kind of task; but there are other objective reasons why pastoral care was at the end of the preachers agenda. The preacher had the overall responsibility for the work of the church. State observation made it difficult to include lay people in administrative work (Finances, membership books, church administration). It was only the preachers who were openly able to expose themselves as church representatives, in public and also in relations with other countries. If a church was built they were both building contractor and bricklayer. In the field of literature they were both author and translator, and also editor and printer. These are objective reasons for the negligence of pastoral care. Church members rarely experienced that their personal questions concerning life and faith were taken seriously. Very often they would have been content if they had met someone who would have listened to them and passed on some joy or was prepared to pray with them.

In short: There is a lack of pastoral care that cannot be overseen. Until today pastors have too many burdens to carry. In the humanitarian sector they are almost misused by foreign organisations - and they accept it, because they do have several advantages from it. We are far from a vision of pastoral care as described by Martin Funk one hundred years ago, when he said: "Joy in the Gospel, enduring pastoral care and sensitivity for the needs of society."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The lectures from the 100th Anniversary of the UMC in Hungary will be published soon by the Historical Society of the UMC.

In Bulgaria weekend seminaries held under the theme "Way to Emmaus" led to a new understanding for the need of pastoral care. This knowledge should now be passed on to the local churches.

In Switzerland and Austria several pastors and lay people started to get pastoral counselling competence through special training. This could be an important field for exchange of experiences between the conferences.

Counselling of families is a major issue. The rapid changes and more difficult living conditions because of unemployment, small flats or houses, the lack of dialogue between the generations; these are the reasons why many families are at breaking point. People live alongside, but not with each other because they have never learnt to set limits or to how to deal with conflicts. If we as a United Methodist Church emphasize fellowship then we should start within the families.

These short remarks want to help us as a church to enter into a poimenic discussion with the aim to consciously consider our relation to people and to life.

### **Relating to life and the heart of people ... in the changes of society**

All nations have to consider the problems of emigration or immigration. All our conferences have to deal with the challenge of giving shelter to refugees and the treatment of strangers in our midst. I am ashamed by the fact that the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia sheltered 500.000 refugees without complaint, even during the NATO bombings and in spite of the western embargo, compared to the refugee policies of the wealthy nations.

Everywhere we have to deal with the changes in national laws concerning religion. In Hungary liberalisation went very far; in other countries freedom of religion is part of the constitution, because western advisers demanded it, but the actual legal situation contradicts the constitution. We may raise our voice in organising the new religious education programmes in the former socialist and today multi-religious countries but because we are such a small minority our strength for practical work is limited.

Another task is it to give an input into our society. We should be able to show that God's sanctifying grace does not lead only to a mystic experience of the individual but to peace and justice for all who share life and creation with us. We should work for the future of Europe and for the identification of our common values. This would mean to take up the challenge of the EU-Charta on basic human rights. In the age of genetic technology the protection of life and the value of the individual are themes that need our full attention. We have to keep our eye on the Balkan region. We are presently sowing little seeds of reconciliation, which we have to tend carefully. Violence is part of the symptoms of the disease of modern society. The World Council of Churches announced last February the decade to overcome violence: Churches for peace

and reconciliation (2001–2010). The United Methodist Church (in USA) has already worked a lot on this issue. We did not take much notice of this in Europe.

There is still a big social and economical inequality between western and eastern Europe that we should not be indifferent to. I am thankful that our Standing Committee on Theology and Ordained Ministry has considered the issue of “Islam in Europe” although there are not yet presentable results for our local churches and members.

The Social Principles of our church assist orientation in many questions. During our last Central Conference in Aarau we felt strongly that our brothers and sisters from former socialist countries were reluctant to move away from more conservative positions. Whether the open approach to social and ethical questions in Switzerland and Austria are accepted at all lengths by individual church members is a good question.

### **Relating to life and the heart of people ... moving as a Central Conference into a new millennium.**

We have to consider the call of our church and its fulfilment in a time of changes with high risks, especially in the – as I would call them – “in-between countries” of central and southern Europe. We are in several ways “in-between”: as a minority church between the large churches, as a confessing church in a secularised society, as a church orientated towards fellowship in a post-modern culture, which is presently circling around it's own ego. Our church exists mainly in countries situated economically between the EU-countries and the poor countries of the south. Democracy and civil society are still in the process of development. Some countries feel that they are also not shown enough attention by the worldwide United Methodist Church and disregarded as a small minority between European Union, Russia and Africa. But it is not helpful to feel sorry for oneself if we want our presence to be acknowledged in the new millennium. The United Methodist Church shall be a challenge to the local culture, not a church giving way to popular trends or, even worse, a church full of self-pity.

Our starting point was the joyful response to the Gospel. Such joy sets us free, so that we do not have to observe ourselves all the time, but that we may, as a minority, act as a catalyst in a society spreading hope. We can only pass on hope and security if we meet the suppression and fragmentation in modern life with the spirit of the Gospel.

On our way into the new millennium we should be a church in dialogue with God and with each other, where identity and fellowship may be found in the spirit of the Gospel. We should go into the future as a community prepared to

learn. Peter Senge, who works in the field of organisation theory spoke of a "learning community"<sup>8</sup> or from a learning organisation.

We are a learning church. This is made manifest in various meetings and dialogues within our Central Conference. We do this in following the New Testament concept of church and community. There is no perfect picture of the church. Chapter two in the Acts of the Apostles may be the only ideal picture. The New Testament Church is always a struggling and learning church. It consists of disciples (learners) and is led by people who are called to serve in an office. But they are always followers of Jesus Christ, constantly learning. The person who consciously sets off along this path of change must know where he has come from and where he is going. He or she has to be prepared to learn from the experiences of the past and be willing to develop a vision for the future and to do the work in the present.

Whoever enters the way of change must be able to bear the tension between those who fight up front and the slow crowd at the back and be able to gain results from the learning process. It is essential that every community that enters this way of change must remain communicative.

In this perspective of learning together I will mention a number of issues which I consider to be helpful and important for the dialogue in our seven Annual Conferences. This dialogue will be influenced by the different experiences in post-communist or in western post-modern contexts.

Many of the western partner churches, which looked for contact with churches in central Europe, brought only new programmes and new activities. They were not willing to follow the path of change together with their partners from the communist era to the post-communist time, or from the indifference of post-communist societies to civil societies with common values. They were seldom willing to learn from each other on their way into the future.

Now, at the end I shall mention a few issues, which I think we should discuss together:

- The role of the churches in the changes from a monolithic state society into a pluralistic civil society.
- The role of voluntary work and of women in church and in society.
- Training and formation of new leadership
- The presence of the churches in secular media
- Dealing with resources with the goal of self-financing
- Religion and national identity
- Ecumenical co-operation in an open society

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<sup>8</sup> The Fifth Discipline. Doubleday. New York 1990. He identified in this publication the components of a "learning organization"

- Family and Christian education
- Pastoral care
- Our contribution to overcome poverty and violence
- Structures of diaconal work

If we take these themes as a learning community with us on our way we will enrich each other and our presence in society will be strengthened. Our thoughts, words and deeds arise out of the joy in the Gospel. This takes us to the theme of the Episcopal Address:

“A joyful response to the Gospel – relating to life and the heart of people”

With thanks for the twelve years of joyful fellowship on our way.  
Bishop Heinrich Bolleter

