

## **Episcopal Address 2005**

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of Central and Southern Europe

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**United Methodist Church**

**Bishop Heinrich Bolleter**

**A LIVING FELLOWSHIP - BECAUSE GOD LOVES LIFE**

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## **1. John 4, 11–12**

Jesus said, “Beloved, since God loved us so much, we ought also to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and His love is perfected in us.”

## **Greeting**

### **A living fellowship**

#### **Fellowship is alive**

1. where diversity enriches
2. where doors are open
3. where resources are shared
4. where love overcomes fear
5. where authority is present
6. where we live in covenant with God

#### **because God loves life**

1. begin with human desire
2. begin in the family
3. begin in the gathering of the church
4. begin with political responsibility
5. begin with churches working together
6. begin with different religions living together

## **Conclusion**

### **Appendix**

List of issues which we have to deal with.

## **Greeting**

I would like to welcome all of the delegates from 14 nations of the United Methodist Church in Central and Southern Europe. God has graciously led us as a Central Conference for 50 years through times of difficulties and great changes.

As minority churches in our own countries we have experienced the strength of fellowship in our Central Conference. We have experienced solidarity in times of reconstruction after the second World War and during the long period of the Cold War, which could not destroy our fellowship and knowledge of belonging together, even when walls and fences were built.

We give thanks together to God, who has gathered us here from many different nations and cultures. We give thanks to God who has prepared us to stand up for each other in times of need and peril. We praise God for the witness of our fathers and mothers, as well as our sons and daughters, who have courageously proclaimed the Gospel in their respective contexts, and have borne the Methodist connexion over the years.

## **A living Fellowship**

### **1. Fellowship is alive where diversity enriches**

We call ourselves Methodists and we speak about our connexion, that we belong together on a local level, within our districts, within the Annual Conference and within the Central Conference. I would like to mention two different aspects of this belonging together: growing together and searching for independence.

**1.1** We live in a new era of European growth. We are accompanied by the question how we as churches contribute to the common values that form and maintain this new Europe. We live in a time when European norms and regulations force us to adjust to them. This exerts influence not only on the accounts and finances of the Annual Conferences, it even concerns the quality standards of our social institutions.

As a Central Conference we hold to the basic structure of the Discipline of the United Methodist Church and do not want to make too many adaptations. We send European delegates into almost all of the boards of our worldwide Church and expect support for our financially weaker Annual Conferences, but we do not support (except for the Bishops' Fund) the budget of the worldwide UMC through our contributions.

**1.2** On the other hand, we live in a time of increasing independence and insist on emphasizing the different conditions and thus development of the UMC within the various European countries. We should not underestimate the differences in economical development. The churches in South-East Europe are more dependent than ever before on support from outside.

We call ourselves Methodists and we speak about the connexion, but we find it hard to accept a common discipline and a common understanding of the ministry of the church or of church membership. Each Annual Conference sees itself as an exception.

Where does our common path lead into the future? The outward walls and fences, which tried to separate us, are gone. However, the Annual Conferences are often trapped between their pride and their fear of disappearance. I am concerned about a church that wants to live in monads, living only for itself in small units, without connexional relationships. I don't think that we have found yet the healthy balance everywhere between belonging together and independence.

Methodists, from the beginning on, always allowed each other ample scope. There have always been people who thought differently, whose hearts were concerned with other matters and hands that built unconventionally. There was always a place in our meetings for those searching and believing. But there was always the strong identity of a free church, which did not aim to do anything else other than to save souls and spread sanctification across the nations.

What unites us today, - this diversity of opinions, convictions and expressions? Is there a common identity that holds us together as a church? Theoretically, yes: but is it in our hearts and minds? We insist that we are a church with a wide variety of theology and practice. But did we not lose face in insisting on it?

Diversity as such is not a blessing, but a diversity united in love and by a common mission is a blessing. I would like to show some developments.

**1.2.1** I recall the process of reception of the Social Principles within the Annual Conferences of our Central Conference. In communist times we were unable to openly discuss them. Today we can communicate but we cannot speak any more with one voice, even though we are rooted in the same biblical message, common tradition and discipline.

I can imagine that some Methodists are afraid of a pluralism that seems to arise in our midst. Paul was confronted with an extremely pluralistic church in Corinth and he still did not call them to uniformity. He explained the meaning of diversity to the church. There is no need for uniformity in expression of faith and service in the church. Unity is not uniformity, but lies in the one spirit that may work in and through it.

To those who fear that unity might be lost I would like to say: the church is a creation of God. God's creation is not uniform. He created diversity: human beings, mammals, birds and even the worm. Such diversity may be found in the living church. And it is the spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline that keeps us together.

No one brings more destruction to the church than those who want it to be uniformed in language, worship, service and living together. I perceive that diversity and unity are always lost because of sectarian independence of local churches and because they start to proclaim that only they are right in holding leadership.

**1.2.2** To stay together in living fellowship is not easy to maintain in a postmodern society. If I mention living fellowship I mean mutual binding in the midst of postmodernism: doing whatever you choose. I mean covenant existence in the midst of processes of individual preference, which lead to egoism and to utilitarianism. "Ego-Ethics", literally "what serves me, is right" destroys common values and living fellowship.

Some of the pastors in Central and Southern Europe have perverted the newly-gained freedom and right of self-determination in postcommunism to "Ego-Ethics",

which leads from trying to fulfil oneself to worshipping the human self. They did this under the disguise of charismatic piety. Because of this they expelled themselves from the wider community. Their constant fear of not getting enough solidified the adhesive love holding the fellowship together.

Young people emigrate to other countries searching for brighter perspectives because they are tired of sharing the fate and burdens of their own country. This leads even more to fear of loss in our churches.

### **1.2.3 Living fellowship takes place in small and in large churches.**

It is interesting to observe, that in the context of our present welfare society, institutions, in order to maintain themselves, turn into large service centres, in which consumer Christians may take what they need. In the same way, smaller churches are being closed down on the grounds that they are no longer able to pay for the pastor's salary.

In contexts of economical stress (poverty) churches seem to take the opposite direction. Small grass-root churches seem to be the model. Their buildings and structures are cheaper and smaller as well as their travelling expenses and they seem to work more with voluntary workers.

Living fellowship is open for reforms. I experience how reform takes place in the Annual Conferences. On the one hand there are manifold special church offices and action programmes to reach out to people outside the church. This is a church reform from above with the desire to create a strong presence of the church through big and regional church centres.

On the other hand, there is the model of the grass-root churches dependent on lay leadership and supervised by travelling preachers. Our new Church Discipline seems to support this second model with the emphasis on local pastors. They are educated lay preachers, who work as volunteers or part-time and care for their small churches. The financial needs drive us more and more into this direction. Such smaller churches develop a variety of creative powers, but they will not be able to serve as centres for Christian consumers. They will have a lot of autonomy in the development of forms of fellowship and therefore need the supervision of a trained "travelling preacher".

The education of lay people becomes more and more important because of this. If we do not train the lay people ourselves it will lead to estranged grass-root churches and in turn to a loss of connectional relationships. As small churches with well-equipped workers and professional supervision such grass-root churches may be fermenting the whole of the church. I myself believe that grass-root churches will be the bricks of the Methodist Connexion of the future. If this is so, the conference structures, educational means and actions of the church as a whole should try to serve these grass-root churches.

This may even serve as a model for the growing civil society, in which more and more services are delegated from the state to smaller and local institutions which serve the community better. Some of our central and southern European states are in the middle of the process of change from a state-led society to a civil society. The church has a very important role in the development of activities at the grass-roots of such societies. There is no reason to be euphoric about this. Central Europe, as a “state of mind”, has a more lasting effect than any political or church influence. The way to real transition is still a long way.

Once again: the connectional existence is important especially for the grass-root churches. Without a common concept the small churches will soon be lost in their particular interests and only serve themselves. They may even become victims of sectarian movements. We have to continue to learn that the church is not here for itself. Therefore we do need each other in “connexion”. If we are fixed on the church as a “church centre” or as a “grass-root church”, we may in doing so sacrifice the openness of the church to the world and endanger the mission of the church.

## **2. Fellowship is alive where doors are open**

In the *Losungsbüchlein* (book of daily devotions) of the Moravians at Epiphany there was a prayer from Africa: “Jesus Christ, you were born of a Hebrew mother, Babylonian wise men worshipped you. You were full of joy because of the faith of a Syrian woman and a Roman centurion. Your cross was carried by an African. We thank you that we belong to you. Help us to bring your kingdom as heirs to people of all races and peoples.”

A living fellowship which follows this Jesus must have open doors for all races,

nations and generations. This is stated in Article 4 of the Constitution of our church. We are open for the service of men and women in all of the offices of our church. Our church in Central Europe and on the Balkans started to work among the Roma and Sinti people and we have experienced that they are open for faith and live as good Christian churches in their towns. The church grew most amongst the marginalized of our societies.

We do not allow national, political or other loyalties to limit our unity in Christ. This has to be implemented also among our minorities on the Balkans and in Serbia-Montenegro.

The Council of Bishops continues to support the initiative “Children and Poverty”, because it believes that children suffer most under poverty. They remind us daily of the words of Jesus: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25,40) Any reform of the church will reveal itself according to how it considers “the least” and what it does for them.

### **3. Fellowship is alive where resources are shared**

It is through partnerships and channels like the Fund Mission in Europe (an instrument of the European Methodist Council), the Advanced Special (a network for fundraising from the General Board of Global Ministries in New York) and “Connexio” (a network for mission and diaconal action of the UMC in Switzerland and France) that financial resources are shared with the Annual Conferences of postcommunist countries.

On May 1st 2004 a dream came true and four of the countries of our Central Conference became members of the European Union. We thought that this would relieve the financial situation. The reality of the churches is completely different. There is still a great amount of hidden poverty. The needs of the countries are different. Besides financial assistance needed for certain projects there remains the big financial problem in bearing the costs of the salaries of full-time workers and the costs of theological education. Even the churches in the West start to economize. The funds for the poorer churches in Central and Southern Europe have been reduced. Salary support in 2005 had to be cut by 20 per cent. A further 15 per cent



reduction will be made in 2006. We can no longer afford the luxury of a pastor for every church. Alternatives are necessary and must be sought for.

There is a big financial gap in the funds for theological education in all postcommunist countries in Europe. This problem arose very quickly. The churches in South-East Europe are growing rapidly and are in urgent need of pastors.

It would be too one-sided to mention only financial support. There is a great deal of support across borders of different countries for retreats and seminaries for women, children and youth. There is an intensive exchange of information in the Superintendents' Conference and in different churches visiting each other.

More and more teams of volunteers are helping in building projects within the different conferences. The Tent Mission makes an important contribution to Evangelisation in Central Europe and in the Balkans.

The Austrian Annual Conference has offered competent assistance in the questions of the relations between Church and State and of Church Constitutions in Macedonia, Croatia, Albania and in Serbia-Montenegro.

These are just a few highlights of a strong network of mutual support in our Central Conference.

#### **4. Fellowship is alive where love overcomes fear**

A living fellowship may show the treasures of its stewardship. It may raise its voice in a time of failing dreams, on proclaiming the power of the Gospel, which transforms people and relationships. It knows that every single life is precious because God Himself loves it. A living fellowship sings and plays music and tells about the love of God which is new every morning.

After the tragic events in New York and Madrid and the propagation of war against terror, many people have been frightened and seem to be paralysed by fear. Fear, loss of meaning and outbreaks of violence take away the basis of existence of many people.

The Council of Bishops sent a study document to the Conferences with the title "In Search of Security". It shall give guidance how to relate to the questions of security and vulnerability of life. There is a need to find new trust and to experience that love overcomes fear.

## **5. Fellowship is alive where authority is present**

There is a very diverse understanding in our Central Conference on the question of how to deal with authority. This became obvious at the last bishop's election in 1989 and when the vote for lifelong episcopacy was taken in 1993. Some of the western delegates had a tendency towards a functional understanding of the bishop's office and pleaded for a limited time of office of eight to twelve years, whereas the delegates from the East and South felt the the call into episcopacy was a lifelong call. Certainly contexts of society and church life play a role in this. I experience similar tensions in other parts of life. I would like to call it the "unequal timeliness of the church". A bishop does not only have to endure this, he should also be willing to accept it. This is not a question of tolerance, it is about trust. He needs also, for example, to feel at home in "traditional" and in "contemporary" worship styles. I often recall a quotation of the poet Johann Wolfgang Goethe. He says that a human being should be given two things for life: roots and wings. They are especially important in the life of a bishop! He knows where he belongs, but he is also free to discard pressures and prejudices and seek new ways. He shall, when necessary, carry the banner high at the front and not just drag the train of reality at the back. Roots and wings, both of these are necessary.

The theme of "authority in the church" cannot be referred to without context. In European societies the concept of authority (and office) have generally a negative association. People think of misuse of power, of manipulation without participation of those handled, and the defence of male dominion. Episcopal authority cannot be understood and developed in Europe without considering all the negative examples of the Roman Catholic Church. Authority within the church has assumed over the years a colourful dimension. Many of the so-called authorities were only interested in stabilizing their own influence and power. Even the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, is not a helpful example. He supported the monarchy and thought that it was the best concept of government.

Theologically as a church we take the authority of Jesus as a model. He did not come to be served, but to serve (Mark 10, 45). Authority arises out of example and commitment. This is authority as we would like to understand it. Authority in the church comes from those serving and not from those who would like to rule. It

comes from those who do not simply command, but invite us to take thought, to faith and to take action. Authority is with the one who reflects the love to God and men.

I feel that we suffer from a clericalism from below and not a clericalism from above in most of the churches. Authority is misused when lay people want to dominate others and nobody speaks out against it, not even the pastor.

Richard P. Heitzenrater says in one of his essays, (I have only the manuscript without further detail), that leadership in Methodist heritage should be influenced by a theology of grace. Leadership is expressed in a person which reflects the grace of God through forgiveness and sanctification. Such a leader brings to light the grace of God and the given talents of people and together help to transform the world. In such a way a bishop (male or female) does not strive to preserve power. He (she) does not look for personal honour or outward glory. He (she) finds his (her) firm ground in the knowledge of the love of God poured into the heart through the Holy Spirit.

## **6. Fellowship is alive where we live in a covenant with God**

There is a deep desire in God for fellowship with all people, whom He created, each and everyone as an original. This is the reason for the covenant He offers to us in Jesus Christ. Christian fellowship is an answer to the covenant which God has made with us in Jesus Christ. I would like our pastors to meet regularly in covenant groups, to encourage each other in faith and service. “The covenant of the ordained”, introduced in our discipline, sets a too broad basis. It does not allow mutual binding between individuals.

We do not choose with whom we are joined in the covenant. It is God who sets men and women, youth and others side by side to transform the world, because He Himself loves life. Those who know the promise God gives us in the covenant will not just consider and speak about their own group. Everybody will be included in God’s great vision to renew the whole world.

## **A living Fellowship - because God loves life**

How can one talk about fellowship without becoming an ecclesiological introvert? What do we support, knowing that God loves life? (John 10, 10) We know usually what we want and what we don't want. But what do we stand up for?

### **1. Because God loves life: begin with human desire**

It is the longing of all people that our lives may be fulfilled. But this is something not to be taken for granted. Faith is no life insurance for success and no vaccination against need. But it may give us the strength to deal with different situations in life and not be overcome by them.

A living fellowship has a great deal to offer to human beings and their yearnings. We must be prepared to set out and become companions of the people in their every day lives, and be at their side when they deal with life outside their usual routines. God's love is especially directed at the unfortunate.

### **2. Because God loves life: begin in the family**

The family is ailing, in the East and West, North and South. But the family remains the best of all institutions. For decades we have watched how the family was defamed. Today we have to start anew to create a new awareness that it is the family which can and shall pass on values and virtues, necessary for communal life. If we want our children to know that Golgatha is not a kind of toothpaste, then it is not just the task of religious education in schools or in the churches. It is primarily a task of the family and we ought to equip families to fulfil their tasks. As a living fellowship we want to support families to live and to survive and to be able to pass on the values of our culture and of our faith.

We would like to help parents not to shun their responsibilities of bringing up children and of education. We would like to support the fight against growing drug abuse and the tendency to become sectarian or simply esoteric. And we do this because God loves life and therefore loves the family.

### **3. Because God loves life: begin in the gathering of the church**

We should try together to find the will of God and prevent differences in opinion drawing us apart and isolating us from each other. Some churches draw on the lifestyle of young people and form a model for all from it. Very often this attitude comes not only from young people but from those who have just grown out of their youth. If God loves life He does not exclude other generations and their expression of faith and piety. We need a church that is a “church together” which includes everybody who works with us towards reconciliation. More rituals marking transition in life could bring about more healing. Why should it only be the beginning of the school year we celebrate or the step from youth into adulthood? We could be more attentive together: the loss of employment, for example, is also a chance to accompany such people with care and love. We might celebrate the day the last child leaves the house of the parents and a couple starts to live in an empty nest. Do we celebrate retirement? If God loves life we should watch with care where and when life changes. We can reach out to offer meaning and develop new tasks for volunteers. I wish we would spend less time in quarrelling about the best forms of worship and think more about what gives our life meaning, - things like faith, hope and love. We should be more interested in the wine than in the skin holding it.

### **4. Because God loves life: begin with political responsibility**

Leaders from all over the world discussed at the “Forum 2000” in Prague the themes of the future. Former state president of the Czech Republic, Vaclav Havel said, “Increasing ungodliness is one of the reasons for the global crisis of today”. Those were the days when we sat together in the churches discussing “Peace, Justice and Integrity of Creation” and even made suggestions for action. Religious life in our churches has been privatized. The question of peace has been silenced by the fear of terror. The question of justice is silenced by the growing fear of getting less than our fair share. Fear endangers communal life and solidarity. The search for a maximum of individual luck does not leave enough strength for sharing. In politics and in public life there seems to be a lack of competent people. Very often people ask themselves the question: why should I burden myself with this?

The Gospel gives us strength to overcome the fear of not getting our fair share. Why

are so few Christians prepared to take over public office? Should we not encourage people and accompany those willing?

### **5. Because God loves life: begin with churches working together**

We proclaim Christ and do not need to draw borders to other churches.

On a European level we have many themes in common, common challenges and experiences of mutual support. We are represented again in the Central Committee of the Conference of European Churches (CEC). CEC is an important platform for us in questions of migration and asylum seekers, because we need to look at them, not from a national point of view, but from a European perspective. We have been informed and involved through CEC concerning the European Constitution. The Charta Ecumenica is a helpful mutual commitment of European churches to one another. We welcome this development as a minority church. The Community of Evangelical Churches in Europe (CECE, formerly known as the Community of Leuenberg) showed great solidarity with us in the question of state recognition of our church in Serbia-Montenegro. CECE is concerned in talks about “Protestant profile of the mission of the churches in Europe” and with “Form and structure of Protestant churches in a changing Europe”. The CECE is presently in dialogue with the Baptist Union. In several Conferences the regional structures of cooperation of Christian churches play an important role. Cooperation beyond the local church in the fields of the social and welfare work of the church is not so widespread yet. Openness for one another is possible if there is a strong and explicit identity.

### **6. Because God loves life: begin with different religions living together**

People of different religious faiths live close together in present society. What is part of the tension of everyday life in western European countries is felt more and more in central European countries. On the Balkans, the life of Christians and Muslims is influenced both by periods of peace and of war. These war periods have left deep wounds. As Methodists we are not a national church. This allows us to relate differently to other religions. We want to respect the faith of others, but we do understand dialogue as a possibility to give our own witness. It is also valid to say: it is possible to be open to others if there is a strong and explicit identity.

## **Conclusion**

During the years I served actively as bishop, a strong movement of individualisation took place in the world and within the church. This has made my task to keep together a Central Conference of 14 different nations quite difficult. The pride of local churches turned out to be more important than the connection within the Conference and over national borders. In a time in which individualism and particular interests seem to blossom it is important to raise the question of fellowship. This is what we have to do if we want to have a common future in the church and in the world. We have to continue thinking about, and rethink, the *vita communis*.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer had the same interest in his own time. I remember his treatise “Life Together”, which he wrote in time of great peril in the seminary in Finkenwalde. He joined two things together: the necessity that Christians stand together in times of need, not to be isolated from one another and be scattered by the wind. And he emphasized that Christian fellowship should not be separated from the world. *Vita communis* is not the life of a monastery. It takes place in the midst of the world.

Living fellowship must be aware of its context and *kairos*. Only in this way may it raise a critical and prophetic voice in this world. This is the way in which it may authentically proclaim the healing message of grace in Christ Jesus and the message of love overcoming fear. Living fellowship does not allow religion to become a private affair. It is not like cream on a cake, but it is salt in the wounds of society. A living Christian fellowship carries the gospel of life into this world. It tells the world that God loves life.

With thanks for 16 years of pilgrimage together

**Bishop Heinrich Bolleter**

## Appendix

Finally, I would like to mention the issues which we will have to deal with:

- The role of the churches in the transition from a monolithic state society into a pluralistic civil society
- The role of voluntary work and of women in church and society
- Training and formation of a new leadership
- The presence of churches in secular media
- Dealing with resources and self-support
- Religion and national identity
- Ecumenical cooperation in an open society
- Family and Christian education
- Pastoral counselling
- Our contribution to overcome poverty and violence
- Structures of church social and welfare work