Generally there is a great appreciation and willingness to understand the context for our ministry. But of course, there is room for broadening the understanding and deepening the knowledge. Here are five things that are good to keep in mind when visiting Russia and the other former Soviet republics:

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- Media news is always selective.
- People you meet are individuals, not stereotypes.
- The Gospel of Jesus Christ was proclaimed in Eurasia also before 1991.
- God is at work, and there are people with living faith in all churches, not only in our kind of churches.
- When you meet new Christians and visit young churches, you are a role model whether you like it or not.

Here I choose to speak to United Methodists in Central Conferences, i.e. conferences outside the U.S.A.

Let us proclaim Jesus Christ in words and deeds. This is the first obligation and the greatest privilege we have as a church. Whatever is politically correct in the culture where we work, whatever organization we have, and whether our circumstances are favorable or not, this must be where we use the best of our resources: time, energy, money, and personnel. If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel! (1 Co 9:16)

Let us be clear and intentional about our theological task as Wesleyans. In the twentieth century, our church in Norway published four books with sermons by Methodist ministers, two before World War I, and two after World War II. Dr. Tore Meistad studied the subjects the preachers had chosen to address, and found a clear difference between the first two and the two later books. In the early century, sanctification was a dominating theme, while it had almost disappeared in the mid-century publications. I would not be surprised if similar studies in other countries would give a similar result.

This in no way means that Methodist preachers a century ago felt a need to demonstrate denominational peculiarities, or were keen on theological fine points. But it means that they – as the Wesleyan brothers and first Methodists – saw their task to "reform the nation, particularly the church, and to spread scriptural holiness over the land." In order to fulfill our mission today – in words and deeds – both clergy and lay need to be well informed and well aware of our theological task as Wesleyans (see *The Book of Discipline* ¶¶ 101-104)

Let us develop a sound self-esteem as non-American United Methodists. In a historic perspective, the church in the U.S.A. is our mother church. But our relationship today is not a relationship between parents and children. It is not even correct to describe us as sister churches. We are one church! We are members and annual conferences of the same church, and as

such we have the great privilege to be in mission together.

There is no longer time for comparison and self-pity. We have no time for analyzing what we outside the U.S.A. are lacking. "Nobody can look down upon you without your permission," said a sticker I once found on a friend's desk. Paul teaches us to say, I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Phil 4:13)

Let us participate in the financial responsibility for connectional ministries on an equal basis with the annual conferences in jurisdictional conferences, i.e., in the same way as the annual conferences in the U.S.A. Gradually the central conferences have been given the rights to function on an equal basis – now it is time for us to also take up the obligations on an equal basis. Until now, we only have participated in the Episcopal Fund,* but none of the other general funds. Our contribution will not immediately be big counted in dollars, but it is important that we participate in the apportionment in accordance with its basic principle, which is that each is contributing by the same percentage. Giving is an essential part of the Christian faith, and we should not let anything deprive us from the joy and satisfaction of being a part of the church.

Let us make sure that we know which parts of the *Book of Discipline* we can adapt to our specific central conference situation, and which parts we cannot. ¶ 543.7 says, "A central conference shall have power to make such changes and adaptations of the *Book of Discipline* as the special conditions and the mission of the church in the area require, especially concerning the organization and administration of the work on local church, district, and annual conference levels; provided that no action shall be taken that is contrary to the Constitution and the General Rules of The United Methodist Church; and provided that the spirit of connectional relationship is kept between the local and the general church."

Organization and administration are the areas where we need to be wisely contextual. The number of members, geographical distances, travel possibilities, financial resources and cultural traditions necessarily make it not just permissible, but compelling to organize differently from region to region. It is only important to "[keep] the spirit of connectional relationship" visible and functioning, lest we become isolated, national churches.

However, to remain a global church, we need to be one in faith, theology and policy. Therefore, *The Book of Discipline* does not allow us to adapt our Doctrinal Standards, Social Principles, and the ordering of clergy ministry.

Ignorance and indifference about these matters create misunderstandings and weaken the global church. ❑

*See comments by Scott Brewer on pages 38-39.

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