

# A View from Germany



Rosmarie Wenner

**M**ethodists all over the world have many things in common: we sing Charles Wesley hymns—in different languages and sometimes to different tunes, but all of us enthusiastically. We live in a connectional structure and, most of all, we are a mission-driven church. Mission is our DNA. Our *Book of Discipline* states: “The mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ” and we add “for the transformation of the world.”



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Although we are not many, you will find United Methodists in Germany. About 60,000 people belong to about 500 congregations. We live in a unique “church landscape” in the Land of the Reformation. Among the about 90 million inhabitants there are 26.2 million Roman Catholics and 25.8 million people belong to the Protestant state-related churches. Only 2.7 million people belong to about 20 small churches such as Orthodox, Baptists and the UMC. Less than 4 million people belong to a non-Christian religion. All the others, about 23 million inhabitants, do not belong to any faith community.

Living in such a country, you can characterize the UMC with the following five criteria:

**1** Methodists know who they are. Discipleship involves an intentional decision. When you say: “I am a Methodist,” you have to explain yourself: What does it mean? Why do you relate to such a small denomination? Your experience of being a Methodist is not a matter of course. God offers his grace and you are challenged to say “yes” to the tremendous gift of everlasting life. Even if your family has been Methodist for generations, you still must make a personal confession of faith and live as an active member in the faith community.

**2** Struggling with a frightening decline in the past 40 years, we have learned not to continue building closed circles in our small congregations, even though we appreciate the supportive personal relationships. We are called to serve as salt and light in our communities. We have exciting stories to share of new mission work and youth ministries.

**3** Many of our neighbours have no idea of the content of the Christian faith. They are open to religion, but they seem to be immune to Christianity.

Mission work starts with building up personal relationships. Very often the first step is through a diaconal ministry. When people get in contact with Christians and start to ask curious questions about the faith, we are challenged to teach them the Christian ABCs. We are at the very beginning of communicating the gospel in such a situation.

**4** The globalization of the world challenges us as members of a worldwide church. People from all over the world are coming to Germany for a short or long time; they are business people, students, migrant workers, asylum seekers, tourists, etc. Building up congregations and ministries for migrants who do not speak German is a vital part of our mission.

**5** We have deep relationships with Methodists all over Europe and in worldwide partnership. We are not a national church, but a worldwide connectional community. For us as a minority church in our country, it is very important to stay connected with Methodists all over the world and to live in ecumenical partnership with other denominations here in Germany and worldwide.

## Looking into the Future

Let us pay close attention to the fact that mission is global and at the same time relates to the context and corresponding culture where you live and serve. It is one gospel, but it relates to many different cultures. Jesus himself models the incarnation of the gospel—"the Word became flesh." **Paul invites us to be a Jew for the Jews and a Greek for the Greeks. The mission field is different in Germany and in Africa and in the U.S. We need to recognize those differences in order to help each other in mission and service.**

Church structures have one main purpose: they enable mission. If we seek to strengthen our mission in all parts of the world, we should reorganize our church structure. Methodists in the U.S. need a place where they can discuss their unique issues such as how to develop programs for mission and training in the U.S., how to decide about the apportionments, how to deal with legal issues within the American setting. It is not appropriate for the delegates from the Central Conferences to vote on such questions at General Conference without living in the U.S. context. In the Central Conferences

we already have a place to do such work. There are many issues which need consideration on the global level. Why don't we speak about mission in a worldwide perspective? Why don't we develop programs against HIV/AIDS globally? We need local bodies (regional conferences) to organize the structures and mission strategies in a specific continent or area – and a global body (General Conference) in order to learn from each other and to answer the global questions. On the global level we need to work towards inclusiveness. "Robert's Rules of Order" is not the only way of democratic decision-making and there are Methodists who do not naturally speak English!

We as the UMC are challenged to set an example for a more just way to live as one church on many continents in a global world. Let us raise more awareness about our diversity. Let us realize the power structures in a church where we live in unequal economic situations. Let us struggle against all temptations to keep poorer conferences in unhealthy dependencies. What does it mean that we—Germans, U.S. citizens, Africans, and Filipinos—are one in Christ?

Partnership means sharing resources and gifts as well as sharing troubles and challenges. We—the Central Conferences—are willing to share our finances (yes, we have money, not as much as many U.S. congregations and not enough to do the mission work without support from the global church, but enough to share), our knowledge of how to live as Christians in a secularized world, our concern because we are so few and our joy about vital mission initiatives such as our youth ministry.

The United Methodist Church is a wonderful vessel to stabilize and extend the transatlantic partnership between "good old Europe" and the U.S. In times of political tensions, in dealing with issues such as how to prevent war and how to defend the creation, we have opportunities to learn from and with each other. Partnership needs face-to-face encounters, mutual visits, pastoral exchanges, common youth programs and so on. We are open and willing to model such a dialogue. □

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