



A View from Norway

Øyvind Helliesen

Methodism came to Norway as a mission from North America. The first Church was founded in 1856, and in 1876 Norway became an Annual Conference. Today, Norway has a population of 4.5 million people, and 13,000 of them belong to the United Methodist Church.



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The UMC in Norway is a small church, but also a healthy church. We have 48 congregations, 60 active pastors, and a strong economy. All the churches pay apportionments at 100 percent,* and the church doesn't receive any financial support from outside the country. We have our own global mission work (participating with GBGM), and use 1.5 to 2 million dollars each year for missionaries and mission work in India, Zimbabwe, Liberia, Angola, and Ukraine. The church supports pastors' salaries in the Baltic countries, and we are a part of the ecumenical aid and relief work through Norwegian Church Aid.

My point is that what began as a small mission has become an independent

Annual Conference, a church that wants to partner with you in "making disciples for transformation of the world." We have grown up!

We Are Annual Conferences

The Annual Conference is the basic body of the church all over the world. The 63 Annual Conferences outside the U.S.A. are as different at the 63 inside. We do ministry in different situations and circumstances. We all have resources we can share, but we also need to receive from others. Some of us have financial wealth, but we all long for more spiritual richness. A special challenge for the Annual Conferences outside the U.S.A. is the language. Most of us are not able to use the material from the general church, but need to produce what we need in our own languages. Most of us also need to have our own theological training.

We Are Connected

Our Annual Conference belongs to Northern Europe Central Conference, which is one of the 7 Central Conferences in the world. Our Central Conference is divided into two Episcopal Areas. The Northern and Baltic area consists of 7 countries, 6 Annual Conferences and 2

District Conferences, and the Eurasia Area with 4 Annual Conferences in Russia and Ukraine. It is a challenge to be an Episcopal church, with only two bishops serving so many countries with different languages. But we have tried to build up the national leadership around the District Superintendents and other leaders. The churches in the Northern European Central Conference are all paying into the Episcopal Fund.** The main purpose of the Central Conference is to elect bishops and to change and adopt the *Book of Discipline* so it may fit into our situation.

It is a myth that we can do what we want with the *Book of Discipline* in our situation. The fact is that 95% of our *Northern Europe Book of Discipline* is similar to the *Book of Discipline*. The *Book of Discipline* only allows such changes and adaptations as are required out of the special conditions and the mission of the church, especially concerning the organization and the administration of the work on the local church, district, and annual conference level. We can't and we don't want to take any actions that are contrary to the constitution and the General Rules of the UMC, and we want to provide that all our actions are in the spirit of the connectional relationship with the rest of the UMC.

We Are a Minority Church.

The UMC in Norway is, as all the other UMC churches in Northern Europe, a minority Church. In Norway, the majority church is Lutheran, which is also what we call a “state-church.” Eighty-five percent of the population belong to this church, and for many Norwegians belonging to the Lutheran church is a part of their identity. The close connections between the state and the church have always been a challenge for the so-called “free churches.” The UMC has good relations with the “Church of Norway,” and has made an ecumenical agreement with them called “Fellowship of Grace.”

We Live in a Secular Society

More than 90 percent of Norwegians belong to a church, but only 3 to 5 percent attend a worship service. That may be what differs most from our society to what is normal in the U.S.

One interesting phenomenon is that the “The Norwegian Humanist Association,” whose members base their ethics only on human values, are bigger than all the “free churches.”

Norway has a rich Christian tradition, but today it is a common task for all the churches to stand together and bring Christ back to our nation.

What the Future Requires

We need a new global structure. Structure doesn't solve all our problems, but still we need a structure that enables us to work as equal partners all over the world. We are no longer a U.S. church with mission branches in the rest of the world. I think the proposal to the General Conference about the global nature of the church is a good start.

We must think globally and act locally. The UMC is global in scope, and local in thrust. Our connectionalism is a vital web of interactive relationships. We must build relationships between people and churches all over the world. The local church needs to be involved both in what's going on in its local society and in the world. I believe that God calls us to “transform the world” by fighting against poverty, war, injustice, diseases, and our destruction of the climate and the environment. As Methodists our call is both to “save the souls and save the society.”

We need leaders who are willing to

lead. Making disciples for Jesus Christ is first of all about empowering leadership. We need lay leaders and pastors who are empowered by the Holy Spirit and the church, and equipped for the ministry in a post-modern world.

We need to shift from a church that is run by pastors and professionals to a gift-oriented ministry based on the priesthood of all believers. We need leaders who help us focus on God's vision for the church, and who are willing to be change makers when it's needed.

We need to focus on how to be a contemporary church. The UMC is declining in Europe and in the U.S. Some think it is primarily a result of secularization. I believe the reason is mostly in the church. We have been more occupied with saving the church, the tradition, and the organization than saving people. The people who seek “spirituality” don't think that the church can meet their longings. Young people are leaving the church because they don't want to be members of organizations; they want to find faith communities that can make a difference in their lives. The first step of being a church for today's people is to rediscover that the risen Christ still is the center of the church.

We need to rediscover Christian Conferencing as a Means of Grace. For John Wesley, Christian Conferencing was a way to be church. He believed that the Holy Spirit could lead the church when Methodists conversed with each other in small groups and conferences. **Christian Conferencing was revival, fraternity, and polity, and it was truly a Means of Grace. We have made conferencing into a bureaucracy. I am dreaming of a church where we no longer use our words to fight against each other, a church where the main purpose of conversation is listening for God's voice in our voices.**

*Refers to apportionments established by the Norway Annual Conference for support of that Annual Conference's ministry and mission.

**These contributions are “voluntary” at this time. See Scott Brewer's comment on pages 38-39. □

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