

Central Conferences in Europe after 2022/23

A Task Force Mandate for a continuing UMC

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Important remark: The active bishops will prepare a finalized version (with update from decisions of the postponed GC, including for the timelines mentioned) that will be sent to all central conferences at their sessions between November 2022 and March 2023.

1 - Background

The postponed General Conference may decide in September 2022 on a plan for a separation into two or more churches (e.g. Protocol on *Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation and Restructuring*). Decisions on departing from The UMC, may heavily affect the central conferences in Europe and their episcopal areas. For both traditionalists and continuing UMC, a separation will result in a reduction in the number of annual conferences, local churches, and clergy. Within the continuing UMC, it may also lead – **after** the regular central conferences in 2022/23 – to a situation that a central conference may become too small in the number of delegates to continue as a central conference. It then may become a provisional central conference without a right to elect (or re-elect) a bishop. Furthermore, it may be that the Standing Committee on Central Conference Matters chooses to assess the situation of the continuing UMC in Europe after having done an assessment in Africa (in 2015) and in the Philippines (in 2019).

Therefore, we ask the Executive Committees of the three Central Conferences in Europe that they agree on a common mandate for a joint European-wide Task Force that will study and make proposals for the future of the continuing UMC in all of Europe, its central conference structure, and its episcopal supervision. The Executive Committees shall submit the mandate to their respective central conference for affirmation. Each annual conference that decides to remain in the United Methodist Church in 2023, shall elect their member(s) to the Task Force.

For information:

Important regulations in the Book of Discipline 2016, related to central conferences:

At present, the relevant parts in the Book of Discipline (edition 2016) related to central conferences and the number of their bishop(s) are the following:

Constitution: Section V. Central Conferences ¶¶ 28-31

Organization and Administration, Chapter Four The Conferences, Section III. Central Conferences ¶¶ 540-548, and Section IV. Provisional Central Conferences ¶¶ 560-567. Furthermore:

- The number of central conferences requires a two-thirds vote by General Conference ¶ 540.1
- The minimum number for creating a central conference is 30 clergy and 30 lay delegates ¶ 540.2 with a ratio according to ¶ 541.1 (2+2 per AC or Provisional AC and 1+1 for a mission; but no additional delegates from ACs or Prov. ACs that would allow for more than one for every six clergy, with a last additional delegate for a number giving a majority of the fixed ratio); it means in practice: if a central conference has more than 180 clergy (active or retired), it can certainly remain a central conference, below that number you need to make the exact calculation of both factors, number of ACs or missions and number of clergy.
- ¶ 540.2 allows General Conference to differ from these minimum numbers of 30+30 delegates (“except as the General Conference may fix a different number”);

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- The number of bishops in a central conference is decided by General Conference ¶ 543.2, according to the criteria set out in ¶ 404.1 (related to an assessment by the Standing Committee on CC Matters);
- The central conference fixes the tenure of bishops ¶ 543.3, and the areas and residences of bishops ¶ 543.5;
- The central conference fixes the numbers and boundaries of annual conferences ¶ 40 and ¶ 540.8, according to the minimum numbers of clergy for annual conferences (¶ 540.8).
- To a provisional central conference may be granted all the rights of a central conference with the exception of electing its own bishop (¶ 562).

See also appendix on the present statistics in the central conferences in Europe (2019).

2 – Timeline and Process for the continuing UMC

2.1 Provisional timeline in a continuing UMC if the Protocol is adopted by General Conference in late summer 2022

As any change in numbers of central conferences and numbers of eligible bishops is the authority of General Conference, a petition for such changes needs to be submitted to the continuing UMC General Conference which probably may be convened between 2024 and 2026. The submission deadline for a petition is 230 days prior to the opening of General Conference. However, annual conferences may submit petitions up to 45 days prior to the opening of General Conference. A petition related to a central conference will be forwarded to the Standing Committee on Central Conference Matters that will directly report to the General Conference. Therefore, there may be an extremely narrow time-window for the work of a Task Force and submitting a petition, depending on the date for a General Conference of the continuing UMC.

As all annual conferences will have a chance to vote whether they remain in The UMC or depart from it, they shall be encouraged to make this decision following the regular central conference in 2022/23, but before end September 2023 (cf. document “On Separation”). It is planned that the Task Force for the continuing UMC will begin its work in October 2023. A petition to the next General Conference of the continuing UMC might need to be ready for submission in summer 2024 (if the next GC will be in May 2025), or – depending on the next GC – earlier or later. For the moment, we propose a timeline where a petition will be ready for submission in summer 2024. After the postponed General Conference 2022, the bishops will update the timeline.

2.2 Process and timeline for a Task Force

The common mandate for the European-wide task force shall be enacted by each of the three central conferences in 2022/23. However, the membership of the task force shall only be composed of those annual conferences who want to remain in the continuing UMC. Annual conferences that remain in the continuing UMC shall elect their member to the Task Force prior to September 2023. It is recommended that these members are part of the executive committee and/or an other key leadership body of the respective annual conference.

Furthermore, the reporting and final agreement on a petition cannot be handled by the regular central conferences of the continuing UMC, as they will only meet after General Conference. Therefore, the central conferences will have to give authority to their executive bodies for approving a petition at a meeting briefly before the deadline for submission.

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For cost-effectiveness, it is recommended that all meetings of the Task Force will be held online, but that the chairperson and the secretary of the Task Force will have a budget for traveling to executive meetings of each central conference for reporting in March 2024 and the final meeting in summer 2024 (tentative date: June 28-29, 2024).

Following the meeting of the executive committees of the central conferences in March 2024, the task force will design a hearing of its draft report among the church councils / executive bodies of the annual conferences of the continuing UMC, between April and May 2024. The executive committees of the central conferences will be asked to organize the implementation of the hearing in their annual conferences, collect the responses and report back to the task force by end May 2024.

For finalizing the petition, all executive committees shall meet in person, in summer 2024, together with the chairperson and secretary of the Task Force (tentative date: June 28-29, 2024). Such a European-wide meeting of the executive committees will be important for generating a common agreement on the petition that will be submitted to the General Conference of the continuing UMC. The vote will take place separately for each executive committee and a majority vote is needed in each of the executive committees for submitting the petition to the General Conference.

3 – Mandate for a Task Force for a continuing UMC

Each of the three central conferences authorizes the creation of a European wide Task Force on the future of the central conferences of the continuing UMC in Europe with a common mandate.

3.1 Task Force Mandate

The Task Force shall have the following mandate and provisional timeline:

- a. The task force shall begin its work in October 2023. The language of all sessions and reports will be in English only.
- b. The task force shall study the effect of the decisions of General Conference on bishops, clergy and annual conferences concerning their decision to depart or remain in The UMC. It shall make proposals for organizing the work of the continuing UMC in Europe.
- c. The task force shall bring an interim report to each of the executive committee meetings of the central conferences in March 2024 which shall give an initial feed-back to the task force.
- d. In April, the task force shall send out a revised interim report with a questionnaire. Through the episcopal offices, it shall be sent out to the church councils (or respective executives) of each annual conference remaining in the continuing UMC, for consultation. The feed-back from AC church councils shall be collected by the episcopal offices and sent to the task force no later than May 15, 2024.
- e. In June, the task force shall draft a final report, including a petition to General Conference, for the future organization of the work of the continuing UMC in Europe concerning the number and borders of central conference(s) and the number and areas of their bishops. The task force shall submit its final report to a joint in-person meeting of the executive committees of the three central conferences for approval.
- f. At the joint in-person meeting of all three executive committee meetings in July, the final vote on the petition to General Conference will be made by each executive committee individually. A majority vote in favour of the finalized petition is needed in each executive committee in order to submit the petition to General Conference. The chairperson and secretary of the Task Force will be responsible for submission of the finalized petition to General Conference.

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- g. All meetings of the Task Force shall be held online; the chairperson and the secretary shall have a budget for travel to each of the executive committee meetings of the central conferences in March 2024 (accommodation paid by the hosting executive committee) and to the joint in-person meeting in July 2024. The costs are evenly split among all three central conferences. Each central conference pays the costs of the meetings of their own executive committee.

3.2 Task Force Composition

The Task Force shall have the following composition:

- a. A bishop as the chairperson, named by the active bishops in Europe; the chairperson may be one of the active or retired bishops in of the continuing UMC in Europe;
- b. All active bishops of the continuing UMC in Europe;
- c. Among those remaining in the continuing UMC, each annual conference elects two members and each provisional annual conference elects one member to the Task Force prior to end September 2023. A member of the Task Force shall have past or present experience on the level of the central conference and/or European Methodism and be part of the leadership in the respective annual conference. Annual conferences who can send two members, shall balance their membership between clergy and lay, man and woman.
- d. The European Methodist Council is invited to delegate two persons with voice but not vote from two different of its non-UMC member churches, at the expense of its sending church and/or subsidized by the EMC.
- e. The Task Force organizes itself its work, including the election of a secretary.

Cost estimate:

- 2 persons x 3 executive committees in spring and 1 in-person meeting in summer = 8 travels at an average of € 300 each: € 2'400;
- Miscellaneous: € 600;
- Total: € 3'000 or € 1'000 per central conference.

4. – Useful criteria and outline of options

4.1 Criteria for scenarios for European Central conferences after 2022/23 in a continuing UMC

The Standing Committee on Central Conference Matters published a paper on central conferences as an appendix to its report to General Conference 2016 (see ADCA GC 2016). It gives guidelines and criteria for evaluating requests for changes in numbers and boundaries of central conferences, beyond the minimum requirements set in the Book of Discipline. In addition, we want to name for the European situation:

- The CC (one or several) must each be financially sustainable for its own structuring and meetings
- Episcopal areas in Europe need to be geographical areas that help to maintain and/or create connections between the countries
- Language and cultural similarities are helpful to connect different countries in an episcopal area
- Episcopal offices may change in location, but should not depend on the country where the bishop comes from, if its office has an important role in strengthening the connection among its annual conferences and countries

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4.2 Imaginable options if one or two of the three central conferences are no more sustainable and one of the four bishops will not be part of a continuing UMC

Compared to the number of membership (criteria in the US), Europe has a too high number of bishops. Compared to the workload of a bishop (criteria for central conferences according to BOD ¶ 404.1) the number of bishops in Europe can be justified. However, the present situation would not give strong arguments for any rise in the number of bishops, but might give reasons for a reduction in a continuing UMC. On that background are offered the following options – and others may be added:

- a) A no more sustainable central conference will become a provisional central conference with episcopal oversight decided by the Council of Bishops; and sustainable central conference(s) remain as at present.
- b) Reordering into one Central Conference with three episcopal areas
- c) Reordering into one Central Conference with two episcopal areas
- d) Reordering into two Central Conferences with one bishop each
- e) Reordering into two Central Conferences, one with one, the other with two bishops
- f) Rethinking episcopacy and have one or several “Part-time bishop(s)”

Appendix – statistics of annual conferences 2019

	Membership (Professing members)	Clergy (active and retired)
EUROPE	52'334	1'052
CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN EUROPE CENTRAL CONFERENCE	13'764	302
Austria Provisional	746	9
Bulgaria-Romania Provisional	1'195	25
Czech and Slovak Republics	1'179	33
Hungary Provisional	509	19
Poland	1'925	30
Switzerland-France-North Africa	6'407	165
Serbia-Macedonia Provisional	1'803	21
GERMANY CENTRAL CONFERENCE	27'904	448
East Germany	7'414	86
North Germany	5'890	98
South Germany	14'600	264
NORTHERN EUROPE AND EURASIA CENTRAL CONFERENCE	10'666	302
Nordic and Baltic (without Sweden!)	9'270	221
Denmark	1'210	25
Estonia	1'461	51
Latvia (District)	557	13
Lithuania (District)	449	4
Finland-Finnish Provisional	773	17
Finland-Swedish Provisional	731	22
Norway	4'089	89
Eurasia	1396	81
Central Russia (Provisional?)	232	18
East Russia-Central Asia Provisional	633	28
North West Russia and Belarus Provisional	142	9
Southern Russia Provisional	141	13
Ukraine-Moldova Provisional	248	13