

Bishop Streiff discusses Bulgaria-Romania move

In early April, [Bulgaria and Romania decided to separate from The United Methodist Church \(UMC\)](#). Bishop Patrick Streiff of the Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe talks about the outstanding issues and the consequences for his episcopal area.

Following the decision of the Methodists in Bulgaria and Romania: What questions are still open and need to be clarified?

Basically, the question must now be clarified whether an annual conference outside the USA can leave the UMC at all without a lengthy process with votes at various levels.

As a bishop, I may declare during a session that a motion does not have sufficient basis in the Book of Discipline or that the annual conference does not have the authority to vote. In such a case, my assessment becomes a question of law that I, as bishop, am obligated to submit to the Judicial Council. According to the constitution of the church, this question then remains pending until the Judicial Council has ruled on it.

In the present case, I sent my rationale regarding the question of law to the Judicial Council on April 8, requesting that this issue be considered on an expedited basis. The Judicial Council has already received a request to explore whether an annual conference in the USA could vote to leave the denomination. So, this is a similar basic question, even though there are differences between the two areas as far as the Book of Discipline is concerned.

Of course, financial follow-up questions such as salaries, pension benefits or the handling of church property, among other things, also attach to the decision. However, I would like to emphasize that neither in the present nor in the future it is about complicating the process of leaving the UMC and about putting obstacles in the way of the respective pastors and local churches. My aim is rather an orderly and, as far as possible, consensual process of separation, based on the Book of Discipline, as we are now trying to explore with those responsible in Romania.

What does this decision mean for the Central and Southern Europe Central Conference?

It is important to notice that Bulgaria has confirmed that they intend to implement the decision now, even though — from my point of view — it came about without a legal basis. Romania, on the other hand, has confirmed to me afterwards that while they want to leave the UMC and join the Global Methodist Church, they want to do so in conversation and in seeking a respectful solution under my leadership. Romania, therefore, will not join the Global Methodist Church on May 1 already.

For about a year, the UMC in Slovakia — as well as in Bulgaria and Romania — has been in favor of exploring the possibility of separating from the UMC and joining a traditional, Methodist church. All the other countries are working within the framework of the "Round Table" on a common way for the Central Conference into the future, even though the majority of them would prefer to keep the present church order.

Does the decision in Bulgaria and Romania have an impact on the UMC in Switzerland?

Those in the UMC in Switzerland who have had relationships with Bulgarian or Romanian local churches will probably be as sad about this development as I am myself. Connexio, the UMC-related mission and development agency faithfully supported the work in the two countries in many ways and for many years.

We already informed all countries of the Central Conference last year that with a departure from the UMC, all support through the Bishop's Office will end, as well. So, with the departure, on the one hand, my supervisory function over this area will end, but at the same time, all assistance that has so far run through the Bishop's Office will also end.

The Methodist Church of a country that leaves the UMC then has the opportunity to decide completely autonomously with whom it wants to build relationships and partnerships in the future. To that extent, it is entirely possible that direct partnerships will continue at the local or district level. However, the Bishop's Office will no longer be able to provide mediating or support services.

Does any cooperation with a Methodist church leaving the UMC cease, including support for aid to Ukrainian refugees?

Aid to Ukrainian refugees is emergency aid, not regular support for the Methodist Church in a country. That is why I told the superintendents during the Annual Conference that for the moment, emergency aid will continue to be provided through the Bishop's Office and that we will then have to work with the donor organizations to determine when the relationship will be directly with the country and no longer through the coordination of the Bishop's Office.

What feelings does the decision cause in yourself?

It was a difficult and sad day for me, too. In difficult leadership situations, it is important for me to remain aware of my own feelings, but not to let them guide me. The expression "keep a cool head" has an important meaning here, because it is important to remain as respectful and objective as possible so that tense situations do not escalate even further. To what extent I have succeeded in this is something that others will have to judge later on, when "the dust has settled."

— *Sigmar Friedrich, Zurich*