

The Bulgaria Provisional Annual Conference of The Global Methodist Church

A FIVE-YEAR TRANSITIONAL PLAN

From Financial Dependence to Self-Sufficiency

I. BACKGROUND

In 1856 the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) in the United States launched its mission in Bulgaria while the country was still under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. Unsurprisingly, the Bulgarian church was completely financially dependent on the Missionary Society of the MEC in its infancy. During the next nineteen years (until the beginning of the communist regime), no serious steps were taken to move the church toward financial autonomy. The dynamic nature of the mission work provided many opportunities that the missionary society financed to full advantage. By 1948 the Methodist Church in Bulgaria had swelled to 2,300 members, 12 pastors, one deaconess, and 22 lay preachers.

The communist regime succeeded almost completely in extinguishing the Methodist Church in Bulgaria. Although the church began that period with 30 churches, only three remained to meet the democratic changes that swept through the country. All connections with the Methodist Church in the United States and Western Europe had been severed. With the help of the Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe of the United Methodist Church, the General Board of Global Ministries, and various partnerships initiated by World Methodist Evangelism, a period of rapid renewal began in the Methodist Church in Bulgaria in the early part of the 1990s. Life began to return to some old Methodist churches and new churches were planted – mainly in smaller towns and villages with dire economic conditions.

This dynamic missionary activity and rapid growth in the number of new local churches were not financially sustainable by the older church congregations. A period of complete financial dependence began again without any realistic plan for gradual growth toward financial autonomy. This created a culture of dependence, which began to be reflected in every area of the church's life. The Central Conference failed to eliminate this danger in a timely manner and chose to maintain the existing model supplementing the decreasing funds through the Methodist Church in Switzerland. Local churches were largely self-sufficient with regard to their utilities and some ministry expenses but were exempted from the responsibility of providing their pastor's salaries. Thus, a norm began to infiltrate the life of the church as church members began to be less active and to show little responsibility for what was happening in the local church.

On April 1, 2022, the Methodist Church in Bulgaria chose to leave the United Methodist Church, and since that time has faced very serious financial difficulties. The Church Council

in Bulgaria created a financial buffer to allow the churches time to adjust to the situation. The only possible way out was the sale of an apartment, a plot of ground, and an auxiliary building that were not being used by the church at all. This buffer allowed us to pay our obligations to the Central Conference of €47,085.90 and replenish the fund for pastoral salaries. The drastic inflation of the past year, as well as the recent national increase in the minimum wage and insurance thresholds, has significantly shortened the effectiveness of that buffer and the time that it would allow for adjustment to these new conditions.

The lack of funds to pay pastoral salaries presents the Methodist Church in Bulgaria with an unfavorable perspective. The decision for us to leave the United Methodist Church was unanimous. Pastors and churches were aware of the possibility of increased financial difficulties, and our pastors have expressed their willingness to become bi-vocational. While at first glance it might appear that bi-vocational pastors is the immediate solution to our problem, it instead creates other serious difficulties. Firstly, it would release the local churches from their commitment to their pastor(s), and this will not create the necessary motivation on the part of the churches to secure partial or full remuneration for their pastors. Other serious difficulties include the lack of enough laypeople to take responsibility for the local churches during this difficult period. Such radical changes over a short period of time could completely paralyze some congregations.

It is obvious that another way must be sought to increase the adaptation period for the Methodist Church in Bulgaria to rise to the challenge of these new conditions. At the same time, this path must be very clearly outlined with the aim that the Bulgarian church fully assumes the responsibility for financing its pastoral remuneration. This objective cannot be satisfactorily achieved without a transitional period of at least five years and external support, which will be systematically reduced to zero at the end of this period. Increasing the transition period is not advisable, as it is necessary to maintain a sense of urgency.

II. Goal, Timeline, and Parameters

GOAL: To provide temporary external financial support for the pastoral salary fund of the Methodist Church in Bulgaria to increase each local church's participation gradually and reach full self-financing. National salary administration is necessitated by the fact that local churches are not independent legal entities. The only legal entity is the Methodist Church in Bulgaria. This approach is also preferable because the churches are not financially equal, and achieving the ultimate goal is only possible by applying the principle of solidarity.

TIMELINE: The Bulgaria Provisional Annual Conference has a yearly income of \$47,000 in tithes, offerings, and income from rental properties. The deficit in our yearly budget is

\$120,000. Over five years, the financial aid needed will gradually decrease from \$120,000 (in the first year) to \$24,000 (in the fifth year).

PARAMETERS: During this time, the Church Council of the Methodist Church in Bulgaria has committed to gradually implementing all the necessary measures to increase its participation in financing pastors' remuneration. This process will be carried out based on a principle of solidarity so that stronger local churches will support weaker ones. The principle of missionary effectiveness will be decisive - all applied measures will be aimed at achieving greater effectiveness in the missional growth of each local church. Encouraging regional cooperation does not mean pastors' salaries will be determined regionally or locally. The salaries of elders and deacons, respectively, are the same regardless of their place of ministry. The differences are conditioned by the length of their ministry since, according to Bulgarian law, a certain percentage for the length of service is added to each employee's salary.

III. Practical Steps

The Church Council is fully cognizant of how ambitious this five-year transitional plan is, but it also acknowledges that this presents an opportunity for the Methodist Church to break a pattern of financial dependence and to take the necessary responsibility for its own mission. Any delay will have disastrous consequences. Concrete, practical steps are needed to achieve the ultimate goal.

1. Reconfiguration of the Church Circuits

The first step of the Church Council will be to restructure the church circuits in a way that will allow for a more realistic achievement of our ultimate goal. The geographic principles that were used in the past to form the boundaries of church circuits will be abandoned in favor of grouping local churches according to their financial and missional capabilities. Larger churches will be responsible for helping smaller ones who cannot independently support their pastors. This will inevitably lead to the closing some local churches and redirecting efforts to other locations with more favorable prospects. Where possible and necessary, the work in these churches can continue under the guidance of trained lay volunteers.

Circuit conferences will be held quickly, and the reasons for delineating the new boundaries and the specific goals facing each church circuit will be explained in detail. It should be clear that the changes are not made only for financial reasons but are aimed at increasing the effectiveness of the mission of the local churches. This cannot happen without the cooperation and solidarity of the churches that make up the church circuit.

2. *Changing the Current Culture of Church Members*

This step is not secondary in importance, but its implementation must be done within the very specific context of what is expected of the church members in each church circuit. This is a complex process in which pastors, deacons, members of church boards, and active lay people will all participate. The latter will be expected to be a voice and an example of the change that must happen in the local churches. Talking about money in the church was considered extremely awkward and unacceptable for a long time. Churches need to be reminded that financial support is one of the commitments that each person made when they became a member of the Methodist Church. Church members should be motivated to take this responsibility seriously through purposeful and wise teaching, exhortation, and personal example.

The financial situation of the church must be presented in an honest and transparent manner. Church members must realize the urgency of the measures that this plan foresees.

It is our recommendation that all church members be asked to make a concrete, realistic pledge of their yearly financial support, which will allow each church board to draw up a realistic budget and have clarity about the goals they should strive to achieve. This step should not be postponed for the indefinite future, but it should be taken immediately. Decisive steps on the part of local churches must accompany the formation of a new culture of church members. Training and action to implement the plan both need to take place simultaneously.

3. *Increase in Rental Income*

The Methodist Church in Bulgaria has several properties that it currently rents out. The income is not large, but it is important to finance the pastoral salary fund.

The range of rental properties may increase in the coming months and thus help to achieve the goal of the transitional plan. This revenue will be allocated to the budget of the individual church circuits according to the objective assessment of their financial capabilities and the number of pastoral salaries that must be provided.

We know the church is not in the real estate business, but implementing the five-year plan is impossible without this revenue. The cost of taxes and normal property maintenance expenses have been deducted in projecting specific rental income. Most of our leases provide that the tenants bear maintenance costs.

4. *Optimization of the Configuration of Pastors*

Optimization of the configuration of pastors (ministers in full connection and deacons) on an employment contract will be gradually carried out. Pastors who have reached retirement age will be able to continue their ministry only as volunteers or for a small stipend.

Low salaries may force some pastors to look for additional work. We must be ready and flexible in the way that we negotiate these employment relationships and be open to change according to the specific needs that will arise.

At the same time, we must not neglect the encouragement of members with a pastoral calling to pursue such a path. Ministry preparation at present is not particularly attractive to young people, as the church cannot offer normal remuneration to its pastors.

5. *Training of Leading Laity*

Changes in how churches and pastors are configured will inevitably result in pastors being responsible for more local churches. In this case, training lay leaders ready to take on greater responsibility in local churches will be a highly prioritized task. This laity will play an important role in the organizational and liturgical life of the churches and must receive comprehensive training.

In the shortest possible time, the Church Council must confirm a training program and choose specific instructors for each of the different courses. The program will be implemented through a combination of face-to-face seminars and distance learning.

This measure will help implement the five-year plan as the number of pastors on staff will decrease due to the retirement of some.

6. *Pastoral Meetings for Mutual Encouragement and Accountability*

The implementation of this five-year transitional plan depends greatly on the effort exerted by the pastors and their willingness to cooperate. For the purpose of mutual encouragement and accountability, all elders and deacons will meet online every Tuesday at 10:00 a.m. The main question before us will be: “What is the state of your ministry and the churches which have been entrusted to you?”. Participants will be able to pray for each other and plan specific steps to help each other.

While these meetings are not an immediate source of increased revenue, they are necessary for monitoring achievements and mutual support, which is an important part of the whole process.

IV. Some Important Details

The Global Methodist church in Bulgaria has the following ordained ministers:

- 8 pastors in full connection who are full-time. (The presiding elder is included in this number.)
- 9 deacons who are full-time.
- 1 deacon who is part-time.

One accountant and one treasurer provide administrative and accounting services. These services are centralized, meaning the local churches are accountable nationally by turning in reports and receipts to the Annual Conference office, but they do not individually carry out the accounting of income and expenses. Instead, that is done on a joint and national level in accordance with Bulgarian law and the church's registration with the government. This is not to say that local churches do not have a trained treasurer, cannot form their own budget, and control their income. The final accounting of their income and expenditure under Bulgarian law is done centrally, as local churches are not independent legal entities.

The Methodist Church in Bulgaria needs \$120,000 to replenish its pastoral salary fund for the first year. Our own contribution to the fund is \$47,000.

One pastor in full connection "costs" the Methodist Church in Bulgaria an average of \$742 per month (including social and health insurance), while the cost of a deacon is an average of \$602 per month (including social and health insurance). The average net salary for a minister in full connection is \$484 per month, and for a deacon is \$393 per month. The deacon salary is the minimum wage determined by the government, and pastors in full connection receive only a little more.

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