



## Theology Education in Post-Communist Countries of Europe and the Balkans

Since the fall of the “Wall” in Europe and the emergence of various forms of democracy in former communist countries in Europe and the Balkans, there has been a reemergence of Christianity and a demand for pastors and church leaders to provide spiritual leadership as well as assist in addressing social welfare issues resulting from the transition from communism to democratic governance.

The United Methodist Church, while a minority church in Europe, is actively responding to the reemergence of Christianity.

While there are thirteen United Methodist Theological Seminaries within the United States and a number of other affiliated schools of theology that prepare clergy and laity to be pastors and diaconal workers in the United States, there are only three established United Methodist Theological Seminaries in Europe. These seminaries are located in Reutlingen, Germany; Tallinn, Estonia; and Moscow, Russia. However, these seminaries are not accessible to many of the individuals across Europe and the Balkans because of geographical and economic conditions and the different languages spoken by individuals across these countries. Therefore, alternative programs are needed to prepare students in these countries for ordination as elders and deacons as well as church leaders.

### Responding to a Challenging

#### Context:

The context in which the United Methodist Church (UMC) operates in Europe provides particular challenges in theology education for preparing pastors and church leaders.

- The four European Episcopal

Areas of the UMC cover most of continental Europe and beyond. They reach from Algeria in the south to Norway in the north, from France in the west to Russia in the east. These Episcopal areas comprise 30 countries including two in North Africa and four in Central Asia. Over 35 different languages are used in the congregations.

- While on a global level the Methodist churches form one of the largest Protestant traditions and in the United States, the UMC is one of the largest denominations. In continental Europe, the United Methodist church is a minority church with relatively few congregations in many different countries.
- The religious context varies from country to country and includes the secularized but nominally Christian contexts of Western Europe, the strongly Islamic context of North Africa and parts of the Balkans, post-communist atheism and secularism in parts of Eastern Europe and a religious (Orthodox or Catholic) nationalism in other former communist countries.
- During the communist era the UMC survived in some of the communist countries in Europe, in others it disappeared. Since the fall of communism, the UMC has been reestablished in these countries and is now experiencing considerable growth. With this new growth has come an increasing demand for suitably qualified pastors and church leaders.

The end of communism brought about rapid changes in the socio-

political and economic situation in many Eastern European countries. The rapid change from a communist to a capitalist economic system and the subsequent integration into the global economy has led to an increasing wealth gap between the rich and the poor. A situation worsened by reductions in the government provided social welfare. In some former communist countries, people live in extreme poverty. In some cases, the end of the communist dictatorship led to the establishment of functioning democracies, in others to political instability and in a number to a new form of autocratic government. In the Balkans the changes resulted in ethnic and religious conflict, wars, and genocide.

- In many countries there are minority groups who have been marginalized and who have experienced various forms of discrimination.

Since the founding of the Methodist Movement in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, Methodists have understood their identity and mission as not only addressing the spiritual growth and development of individuals but also their physical, social, and educational needs. As a consequence, Methodist churches have been actively engaged in social welfare, poverty relief, education, medical care, the combating of social evils and the promotion of social justice. The flourishing of this holistic and integrated vision of the churches identity and mission requires adequately educated and equipped leaders — both lay leaders and ordained leaders.

Given its minority status, the UMC does not have the resources to establish seminaries or similar institutions in the diverse countries in which it is present. The UMC in Europe is thus responding to the demand for new church leaders by encouraging students to study basic theology in established theology programs in their host countries and to take Methodist Studies through the recently established Methodist e-Academy. Courses and resource materials are offered as a means of equipping Methodist church leaders (both ordained clergy and laity) for effective and relevant ministry through the means of distance learning, making use of the appropriate computer technology via the internet.



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# Basic Theology Education



Faculty Preparation

The UMC in Europe is responding to the demand for new church leaders by encouraging students to study basic theology in established theology programs in their host countries or attend one of the established UMC Theological Seminaries in Estonia, Russia or Germany. However, not all students can study in one of these seminaries and must study theology in Universities or study programs in their host country. This is especially true

for students from the Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe where there is no established UMC Theological Seminary and many of the students are constrained by geographic and economic conditions and unable to travel and live near one of the established UMC Theological Seminaries. While students can study theology through an institution in their host country, there is limited or no grounding in United Methodism. In order

to be eligible for ordination as an elder or to serve as a local pastor in the United Methodist Church, students need an understanding of the history, doctrine, and practices of Methodism and the United Methodist Church. The Methodist e-Academy provides the opportunity for further studies in these areas as a means of equipping individuals for ordination as elders in the United Methodist Church or as local pastors.

“STUDENTS NEED AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE HISTORY, DOCTRINE, AND PRACTICES OF METHODISM AND THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH”

## Methodist e-Academy

The Methodist e-Academy is a new initiative of Methodist Churches in Europe to meet the challenge of equipping people for ordained and lay leadership, so that they can equip Methodist churches to bear faithful and effective witness to God’s enlightening, forgiving and transforming grace and thus become agents for personal and social renewal manifesting and anticipating God’s reign.

Our aim is to equip church leaders for ministry through the means of distance learning, making use of the internet and other appropriate computer technology. This will have four components:

- The supplementary education of students for the ordained ministry
- The education of local pastors.

- The education of the laity.
- The provision of internet resources which will enable church leaders to address key issues in their contexts.

## What is the Methodist e-Academy?



Internet based distance learning program

The Methodist e-Academy began as a project of the United Methodist Seminaries in Europe with the aim of providing internet based distance learning courses for people preparing for the ordained ministry in European countries where the United Methodist Church had no seminary. The intention was to supplement the theological education that was available in these countries. The vision grew as it was recognized that internet technology could be used to ad-

dress a far broader range of educational needs within the church. The project was approved by the United Methodist Summit on Theological Education in Europe in February 2007, a meeting of leaders in the church and theological education and it has the support of the four Bishops of the United Methodist Church in Europe.

In February 2008 a governing board was established with representatives from the four European UMC Episco-

pal areas, the British Methodist Church, and the autonomous Methodist churches in Portugal and Italy. The board is chaired by Bishop Dr. Patrick Streiff and the program is co-ordinated by Dr. David N. Field.

The project will be implemented in stages. The first stage, a program of courses in Methodist studies for people preparing for the ordained ministry, was launched in September 2008.

# Methodist Studies

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*Our vision is that ordained pastors in Methodist churches will be rooted in the Methodist heritage, aware of its significance and seek to creatively and critically give expression to it in their theological and ethical positions, their church life, their mission and in their relationship with the broader society.*

In order to fulfil this vision we have developed an internet based distance learning program in Methodist Studies which fulfils and goes beyond the ordination requirements of the United Methodist Church. The courses will be offered in the German and English language. In contexts where there is no Methodist seminary, candidates for ordination will acquire their theological education at other universities or seminar-

ies. The Methodist Studies Program of the e-Academy will supplement this. Where there are existing Methodist seminaries or study programs, plans are being made to integrate the courses offered by the e-Academy into the study program of these institution.

The Methodist e-Academy offers an exceptional opportunity for students to study under faculty persons drawn from Methodist churches

across Europe and who are experts in their field. Further, it will give students the opportunity of interacting both electronically and personally with students from other European countries. It thus provides not only a thorough introduction to Methodism as an academic subject but also enables students to encounter Methodism in its various expressions in Europe and encourages them to learn from the experiences of others in their different contexts.



Faculty and Students in Seminar

## The Courses

In the initial stage the following courses will be offered:

### • Year one

#### • Methodist History 1:

The Early Years: The roots of Methodism, the eighteenth century revival, the life and theology of John Wesley and origins of Methodism to the Christ-mas conference.

#### • Methodist Theology 1:

Methodist Doctrine: An examination of the distinctive features Methodist doctrine as theological reflection embedded in praxis and directed towards personal, communal and social transformation

### • Year Two

#### Methodist History 2:

European Methodism: The history of Methodism in Europe and its roots in Britain and the USA

#### Methodist Theology 2:

Methodist Ethics: Methodism has always insisted that the faith must be expressed in works and as a consequence has concretely addressed many ethical issues. This course will examine the theological ethic which underlies Methodism's ethical responses in order for us to address contemporary issues.

### • Year Three

#### Methodist Ecclesiology 1:

The nature, worship and mission of the church: This course will examine the distinctive features of a Methodist understanding of the church and its mission.

#### Methodist Ecclesiology 2:

United Methodist church polity and discipline

“THE METHODIST E-ACADEMY OFFERS AN EXCEPTIONAL OPPORTUNITY FOR STUDENTS.”

## Method of instruction

The instruction method will include three components.

1. A four day introductory seminar to be held at a central location for all students.
2. E-Learning – Course material will be presented on the internet in such a way that will enable students to interact with, and respond to it, their fellow students and their lecturers using a variety internet based tools.
3. A final seminar at the end of each semester bringing together students at a central location to discuss the material that they have worked on during the semester.

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Church**

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## Scholarships

There are two programs for preparing elders and church leaders to serve the United Methodist Church in the Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe; one is the study of basic theology in non-United Methodist Institutions in the individuals host country and the other is to take the eighteen hours of Methodist Studies through the Methodist e- Academy. Both of these programs require funding to cover the cost of the students who are enrolled in these programs. In response to the need for funding, a scholarship program has been developed to assist students with some of the costs associated with their studies and in some cases travel and living arrangements. The funds are administered through Bishop Streiff's Office and are made available through gifts to Advance Numbers that have been established with the General Board of Global Ministries. The value of the scholarships has been set at \$3,000 even though the cost for these programs exceed this amount. Other funds provided by the Board and Agencies of the United Methodist Church, the Fund Mission in Europe and the Methodist Church of Great Britain have provided funds to assist with the cost of the Methodist e-Academy.

Over the past five years, \$166,500 has been provided for scholarship support to assist students who are enrolled in basic theology education through established non-Methodist Institutions in their home country or through the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Graz/Waiern, Austria for students from the Balkans. Because of the cost of the program in Graz/Wairn, we will not be sending students through this program and are focusing on other arrangements for students from the Balkans. In addition, since 2009, \$72,145 in scholarship support has been provided for students enrolled in the Methodist e-Academy.

Much of the funding for the development of the Methodist e-Academy has come from grants, gifts and in-kind support from the British Methodist Church and UMC Theological Seminary in Germany. Many of these funds were provided to support the start-up cost of the Methodist e-Academy and are not permanent sources of support. Therefore, we need to develop a scholarship program for the basic studies in theology and for the Methodist e-Academy that can be sustained over time. Based on the present demand for studies, we are planning 15 scholarships annually for each of the programs for a total of 30 scholarships to support students from the post communist countries of Europe and the Balkans who are preparing for ordination as elders in the United Methodist Church or as Church leaders. The cost of this program will be \$90,000 annually (\$45,000 for each program base on 15 scholarships at \$3,000 for each program).

## Support

Contributions to the Scholarship funds can be given to the following advance numbers with the General Board of Global Ministries with a reference and copy to Minnis E. Ridenour (706 Somerset Place, Blacksburg Virginia 24060 or by e-mail: [merlaln@aol.com](mailto:merlaln@aol.com)).

Methodist e-Academy: Advance Number 3021181

Basic Theology -- Leadership Training in Central and Southern Europe: Advance Number 15063A

Contributions can also be routed through the Blacksburg United Methodist Church  
Restricted Account: 18-0457 Eastern European Theology Scholarship Fund

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