

German Round Table

Report from the fourth meeting on January 10th and 11th, 2020 in Fulda (Hessen, Germany)

The fourth meeting of the round table: 19 Christians - 15 hours of struggle together for the future way of the Church.

On January 10th and 11th, the members of the Round Table, who came together from all three annual conferences of the UMC in Germany and brought very different theological convictions with them, met together in Fulda under the leadership of Bishop Harald Rückert. Up for debate was the way forward for the UMC in Germany in the face of different basic convictions on questions of homosexuality. The crucial question way: Is it possible to work out a common proposal for the way forward for the church?

The meeting began with a time of devotions and prayer, in which prayer partners of different theological positions came together with each other. Overall, prayer and an orientation toward God formed a special point of emphasis for the encounter. The first order of business was the analysis of the approximately 200 multifaceted responses to the proposals of the Round Table that were sent in by individuals, groups and congregations of the UMC.

Afterwards, it was time to do continued work on the Book of Discipline of the UMC. Because of the clear disagreement in the basic convictions about questions of homosexuality, the members of the Round Table propose to delete all passages that speak about the ordination of people with homosexual orientation and the blessing of same-sex partnerships. Every phrase in each sentence here was considered with much diligence. No other wording has been added instead. With regard to ordination, the Board of Ordained Ministry would still have the task of examining all candidates concerning their basic suitability. The deletions in the Book of Discipline would neither prescribe nor prohibit blessings of same-sex couples. Church councils should be able to discuss blessings of same-sex couples in their own churches and can make decisions.

The third task was continued work on the description of associations that could be formed to give people a connecting point, if they cannot, out of conviction, support the named deletions. It was finally unanimously decided that the Round Table of the central conference for the moment only suggests the formation of an association: an association that expressly maintains the previous position of the Book of Discipline on homosexuality and thus offers a home for those with traditional, conservative positions. With its own theological statement, this association should give its members security in their beliefs and actions. The association is open to districts, congregations, and also individuals. It will choose a leadership team, and the leader will be in close contact with the church leadership. Congregations should be able to vote if they would like to join such an association.

After a long and challenging struggle, the members of the Round Table finally voted unanimously for the overall package of the proposal worked out. There are still a few details to be clarified: The concrete form of the aforementioned association will now be designed by a working group of those siblings from the Round Table who will fill it with life. In addition, a name for this association is yet to be found – suggestions for it can gladly be sent to one of the two authors of the report (see below).

The suggestion of the Round Table will now be presented to the district assemblies and annual conferences of the UMC in Germany and be discussed, before it will finally be laid before the central conference in Zwickau in November 2020 for negotiation. Of course, this happens within consideration of international developments in the UMC. Bishop Harald Rückert also mentioned the proposal recently made by an international group regarding a respectful separation of the Church. The General Conference will discuss this in May 2020.

The fifteen hours of the meeting of the Round Table were characterized by an intensive struggle: How and in what way do we stay true to the word of God? How do we protect and accompany people in their identity without hurting them? How can we at the same time and as far as possible in our different convictions preserve the unity of the church and of congregations? The future will show if the hard work of the Round Table opens up horizons for this and is sustainable. We may, however, pray for it.

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