

The Round Table of the UMC in Germany

Report about the challenging journey

In November 2020

Eighteen months on the road with God — “so that many people in our Church have a home”

On May 1, 2019, the members of the “Round Table” of the United Methodist Church (UMC) in Germany, appointed by Bishop Harald Rückert, met for a first meeting in Frankfurt am Main (Germany). The initiation of the Round Table and the associated discussion process was based on a resolution of the Executive Committee of the Germany Central Conference following the special called General Conference held in St. Louis (Missouri, USA) in February 2019. The Round Table’s task was to search for a common path for a way forward for the UMC in Germany despite differing convictions and conclusions about human sexuality and different sexual orientation. In its meeting on March 10, 2019, the Executive Committee said:

We have “revealed the painful fact that neither the Executive Committee nor the UMC as a whole can reach agreement on how homosexuality should be assessed. In our Church, there are large groups of opposite opinions on this question. We must expect the situation to remain like this for the foreseeable future. Even so, we want to stay together as a Church where people of differing opinions can live with each other. We don't want to let go of each other and we don't want to separate from each other, but we want to hold on to each other and to be there for each other. For we are convinced that Jesus wants to use us and our gifts jointly and together. But we can only stay together as a church if—even without being of one mind in important questions—we live in respectful contact with each other. We therefore want to be a Church where it is possible as well that persons with homosexual orientation can be ordained and blessed in a marriage ceremony, as well as that traditionally minded people can uphold their ideas and lifestyles. (...) We are aware that the endeavor to uphold community will make great demands of us all in future too. This way also includes transforming our Church so that it can offer a secure home to people of dif-

fering convictions. (...) We must all take on our own share of responsibility for each other and make every effort to find ‘vessels’ where the others can be at home. (...) These discussions do not entail trying to convince the others of our own opinion. Rather it is far more a case of finding ways for our Church to be a home for as many people as possible.”

In a total of four personal meetings and four video conferences, in small group work, in many conversations, in questioning people in local churches and charges, in joint prayer, in intercession, and sharing bread and wine in celebration of the Holy Communion, the members of the Round Table have shaped an intense, challenging journey together. This was anything but easy. Different basic convictions, different ideas and understandings of the Bible, of the local church, and of the general Church, different influences—fundamentally different paths of faith and life came together.

After the international debates and events, the Round Table in Germany was also faced from the start with the question of whether and how a common path in the Church is possible and can continue. The first sessions made it clear how difficult it is to find a common language, let alone a common basis of trust. This process was therefore often called into question. It took time—to listen to each other, to learn to understand each other, to build a basic trust, to face God together, to find a new home.

Not only the most recent debates on questions of human sexuality, but also having been questioned on theological convictions in the past, had left traces of hurt and disappointment among members of the Round Table in recent years and decades. Many—from very different convictions and backgrounds—have often been

asked whether the UMC can continue to be a home for them or not. The discussions and arguments at the Round Table itself became a path that not all appointed members could follow to the end.

Nevertheless, God enabled it: Trust was built up bit by bit, as we stood before God repeatedly and could honestly express our fears and reservations. The openness of the exchange, the shared spiritual process, and the capacity to bear with completely different convictions and suggestions shaped the character of the encounters at the Round Table. It became noticeable in the long term how important the ongoing mutual and respectful conversation and above all the common focus on God's guidance in intensive prayer and Holy Communion are. At the end of our two-day retreat in January 2020, we experienced that God gave us a unanimity that surprised us—and has become the basis for the proposals that have now arisen to the Executive Committee. This spiritual experience gave us the strength to continue patiently talking to one another on many de-

tailed questions in the months that followed—and always to listen to ideas and fears from the local churches.

The Round Table members humbly understand the proposal as a well-founded, hopeful invitation not to stand still and give up, but to continue along the path that has been chosen, together and before God. It is an invitation to continue the intensive and trusting conversations about questions of faith, to enable people in the local churches to find a new home, and to accept the living diversity as a gift from God.

The Round Table members are convinced that the prompt and immediate implementation of few changes in the German version of The Book of Discipline and the establishment of the Community Covenant of the Germany UMC opens up a common path furthermore. This serves the local churches to maintain their unity and strengthens them in their mission to make disciples for Jesus Christ.

On behalf of the round table of the UMC in Germany: Stephan von Twardowski and Steffen Klug
In November 2020

Provisional translation. The German original is authoritative for the wording.