

Words of welcome of Bishop Dr Karl-Heinz Wiese
at the meeting of the Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church (in Germany known as the Evangelisch-methodistische Kirche) in Berlin on 1 May 2015

Dear Bishops of the United Methodist Church,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure and honour for me to be able to welcome you here in Berlin. It is not only for the first time that you as the Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church meet here in Germany, but also the first time that you come together in Europe. The fact that you have chosen Berlin for your first meeting in Europe is of great symbolic importance. Berlin is more than ever a world city of culture, politics, media and science, and a magnet for people from all over the world. Berlin stands for the horrors of Nazism, which 70 years ago came to an end with the end of the Second World War. Berlin stands for the Cold War, which culminated in the construction of the Wall. Berlin stands also for reconciliation and unity, which became possible after the fall of the Wall. But Berlin stands also for secularism, religious criticism, agnosticism and atheism.

So Berlin represents the diversity and challenges that characterize the life of our Churches in Germany. The history of Germany also characterizes the history of ecumenism in Germany. The Council of Churches in Germany was founded shortly after the Second World War. The Churches were shaken by the experience that even in these times of terror they did not come to a common witness and action. New reflections started on how the Christian Churches can grow, talk and act together. The aim of the ecumenical movement was to unite the Churches „in a common witness and service“.

Due to the political division of Germany, the Council of Churches in Germany was also divided, because delegates from the Churches on the territory of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) could no longer participate in the meetings. In 1970, the „Council of Churches in the German Democratic Republic“ (AGCK) was founded. After the reunification of Germany the two associations joined together and constituted the new Council of Churches in Germany.

Founding members in 1948 were five Churches, amongst them the United Methodist Church, in Germany known as the “Evangelisch-methodistische Kirche”. Today, the Council of Churches consists of seventeen member Churches and six guest members. Four ecumenical organizations have observer status. The Council of Churches assembles the Churches in Germany, which profess Jesus Christ according to the Scriptures as God and Saviour. Its members experience the diversity of Christian witness as a spirit-given wealth and at the same time as an incentive to persevere in the effort to achieve full ecclesial communion. Through meetings, information and cooperation, through theological discussions and through prayer and worship, the Council of Churches wants to contribute to overcome the divisions of the Christians. It gives a visible expression to the search for new missionary paths, by seeking justice, peace and integrity of creation, as well as to the commitment for people who are deprived of their dignity, and to the common Christian witness in the world.

One of our key tasks includes spiritual togetherness and theological reflection. This is expressed, for example, in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, which we celebrate every year. For the fifth centenary of the Reformation in 2017, the Council of Churches in Germany has the honour to prepare the texts for the global community of prayer. At the suggestion of the Orthodox Church and the „Charta Oecumenica“ we celebrate every year an Ecumenical Day of Creation, in which we praise together the Creator and remind us of what we can do for creation.

2017, the fifth centenary of the Reformation, concerns us as Council of Churches very well. We advocate celebrating the commemoration of the Reformation as a common „Feast of Christ“, because this would also manifest the ecumenical cooperation we maintain in Germany in the Council of Churches. Above all, our planning efforts focus on the Bible as our common treasure. So we published a booklet in which all of our member Churches explain their understanding and their practical and liturgical use of the Bible.

As you can see, there is a special cooperation of the Churches here in Germany, and we thank God for the many things we have achieved together. We remain united on the way to the communion to which Jesus Christ calls us.

Dear Bishops, Brothers and Sisters, I am glad to speak to you today not only in my capacity as the president of the Council of Churches in Germany but, as a Catholic Bishop, I would also like to convey the greetings and blessings of our German Bishops Conference to you. Looking back at more than forty years of ecumenical dialogue between the Catholic Church and the United Methodist Church we can note with pleasure that we have established good relationships based on mutual respect and confidence. The document „Together to Holiness“ published by the international Methodist-Catholic Dialogue Commission in 2010 describes the considerable agreements and convergences which have become apparent in our bilateral theological discussions. This solidarity found its concrete manifestation in the fact that the World Methodist Council in 2006 confirmed the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. For me, this event marked one of the great moments of ecumenism, just as the signing of this declaration by the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation seven years before. I would highly appreciate it if in future other Christian Churches or world associations signed this Joint Declaration and thus make it an ever more uniting bond between the Christian denominations.

Just as on the global level, the United Methodist Church here in Germany too is a reliable ecumenical partner. Bishop Rosemarie Wenner also stands for this. Just as her predecessor Bishop Dr Walter Klaiber, who has presided the Council of Churches for many years, she is with heart and mind committed to strengthening and deepening the Methodist-Catholic relations as well as ecumenism as a whole. I would like to take this opportunity to express our deep gratitude for this.

So I greet you in ecumenical solidarity and wish you God's abundant blessing and his escort in your deliberations. May you be inspired by this fascinating place Berlin, and may you take a lot of good impressions of how the Churches in Germany live and work together.

God bless you.